THE ORGANIZATIONS OF IMMATERIAL LABOUR:
KNOWLEDGE WORKER RESISTANCE IN POST-FORDISM

by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Sociology
In conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
June 2008

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Abstract

Liberal-democratic theories of knowledge work suggest that labour and capital are no longer at odds in the information society. This dissertation critiques such a position, proposing that knowledge worker professions, or ones it describes as involving forms of immaterial labour, are subject to new regimes of exploitation and emergent modes of resistance within post-Fordism. The study begins by surveying competing theoretical perspectives on knowledge work, and moves on to consider the ethical questions, epistemological foundations, and methodological choices involved in carrying out engaged inquiries into collective organization by immaterial labourers. The dissertation’s empirical contribution is comprised of three case studies of labour organization by knowledge workers. The first is the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers, an “open-source” union formed in 1998 by contract workers at Microsoft. The second is the Aliant clerical/call-centre workers in Moncton, New Brunswick, who certified a bargaining unit through the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union in 2001. The third is the Collettivo PrecariAtesia, a self-organized group of Roman workers formed at Atesia, Europe’s largest call centre, in 2004. Drawing on these and other contemporary examples, the dissertation suggests that, in its most promising articulations, the organization of immaterial labour is occurring at the intersection of spontaneous struggles by workers and a process of union renewal underway within certain sectors of the established labour movement. These cases also point to the potential of collective organizing occurring around precarity, or the increasing financial and existential insecurity arising from the flexibilization of labour. Both of these processes, the dissertation concludes, involve a process of adaptation to post-Fordism, in which new forms of organization, new subjectivities, and new social demands are being produced.
Acknowledgements

Like most immaterial labour, this dissertation is to a great extent a collective project. It would not exist without the activists who greeted me warmly, told me their stories, and commented on previous drafts of the research. I hope this work, in some small way, can extend their struggles. I am grateful to the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers in the United States, the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers in Canada, and the Cobas in Italy for their assistance in arranging interviews with the workers for the case studies. Research for this dissertation was completed with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Over eight years and two degrees Vincent Mosco has been the best supervisor I could have hoped for, with the confidence to let me become a scholar on my own terms and the integrity to curb my excesses. Richard Day’s work informs much of this project, and his support has been ongoing throughout it. Annette Burfoot offered timely and important commentary from the foothills of Tuscany. Greig de Peuter, beyond being a treasured friend, was the dissertation’s fourth invisible committee member, offering fresh insights into the project with regularity. I have benefited over the years from the exchanges with Heather Menzies, Sid Shniad, Christian Bosi, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Arianna Bove, and Gigi Roggero. Giorgio De Rossi generously went out of his way to help me connect with the Cobas in Italy. Last but not least, my friends and colleagues Ryan Mitchell, Rachel Melis, Christopher Canning, Simon Kiss, and Emily van der Meulen all not only provided their thoughts on and support for the project, but also facilitated a life outside of it for me over the years it took to complete.
Statement of Originality

(Required only for Division IV Ph.D.)

I hereby certify that all of the work described within this thesis is the original work of the author.

Any published (or unpublished) ideas and/or techniques from the work of others are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices.

(Enda Brophy)

(April, 2008)
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But beneath this apparent habituation, the hostility of workers to degenerated forms of work which are forced upon them continues as a subterranean stream that makes its way to the surface when the conditions permit, or when the capitalist drive for a greater intensity of labour oversteps the bounds of physical or mental capacity. It renews itself in new generations, expresses itself in the unbounded cynicism and revulsion which large numbers of workers feel about their work, and comes to the fore repeatedly as a social issue demanding a solution.

(Harry Braverman, 1974)
Chapter 1
The Subterranean Stream

As opposed to the Fordist era, the information society is frequently described as one in which global flows increasingly shape our daily lives, whether it is capital coursing through stock exchanges, cultural trends spreading across the globe, or digital packets washing through the planet’s information networks. These currents, commentators have pointed out, are the outward signs of a profoundly different form of capitalism, one we began to enter during the period spanning the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Manuel Castells, perhaps the best-known analyst of this restructuring (towards what he calls the “network” society), writes that these flows “are not just one element of the social organization,” but rather “the expression of processes dominating our economic, political, and symbolic life (1996, 412).

The world of labour is at the heart of these processes, and its dominant vocabulary bears their mark. The demand for manufacturing or service work generates “waves” of labour migration across borders, whether actual (nannies or fruit pickers) or virtual (outsourced programmers), legitimate or clandestine. Telecommunications companies implement labour “streamlining” so as to better navigate the currents of the marketplace. Software companies design “call-flow” systems that can route customer queries through call-centres, and the study of “workflow” in contemporary corporations is a thriving field that has led to the restructuring of vast transnational organizations under the rubric of “total quality management.” Both businesses and workers, it is said, must be able to adapt to rapid global fluctuations in investment and consumption, or risk perdition in the information society.
Within these flows, labour struggle and collective organization are frequently dismissed as retrograde. The great mass movements of workers that so profoundly marked the twentieth century, the underlying theory suggests, are a fading part of our history, symptoms of a time when our economy was by necessity brutal and exploitative. Unions, those lumbering creatures of the industrial age, are pronounced a threat to businesses and workers in an economic environment where uncertainty is the only thing we can take for granted. Those who promote this view of the industrial relations marking our age do not need to look too far afield in order to find their evidence. Across developed countries union membership as a percentage of the entire workforce has notoriously been slipping since the 1970s, and within existing sectors of organized labour there has been a marked trend of trade unions adopting the model of “business unionism” (Moody 1997), where cooperation with management is touted as the only way to ensure union survival, and labour conflict is explicitly abandoned. As a result of these developments the organized trade union movement frequently looks embattled, lending further support to the belief that labour struggle and collective organization are not at home in the information society.

An oft-cited example comes from North America, where trade unions in once-militant manufacturing strongholds such as the automobile sector now appear to be competing over which can offer most concessions to companies that, we are told, must make their savage cost cuts in order to compete on the high seas of the global economy. In the United States, the storied United Auto Workers recently agreed to a two-tier wage scale system between current and future employees and said farewell to employer-sponsored health care at General Motors. An even more arresting example is that of the Canadian Auto Workers, whose leadership, in exchange for the union’s presence at Magna International, made a commitment to forego the option to strike, one of the vital sources of a union’s power. Lou Glazer, president of Michigan Future Inc. (an
Ann Arbor, Michigan think tank), presents the thesis for the end of labour struggle and collective organization in characteristic fashion, completely effacing labour struggle in his ode to the new economy: "In industries where competition is global, unions have no role… Wages won't be set by union negotiations, but by the global marketplace" (cited in Haglund 2006). Workers, like everyone else, must go with the flow.

The theory that resistance by workers against owners is in historical decline finds its most fervent application, however, whenever a particular set of professions is considered. Far from the auto factory floor, software, advertising, and graphic design (among others), are being held up as some of the new faces of work – and icons of industrial relations peace - in the network society. These forms of labour are commonly referred to as “knowledge work”, a term that emerges out of the thinking of liberal-democratic economists, sociologists, and management theorists such as Peter Drucker (1999), Fritz Machlup (1962), and Daniel Bell (1999). Specific definitions of what allow somebody to be counted as a knowledge worker vary, sometimes widely (see Mckercher and Mosco 2007a, x-xi), but most liberal-democratic definitions share a belief that these professions involve the creative production, transformation, or diffusion of knowledge and information, usually through the use of information technology. Whatever the term chosen to name this category of work, commentators from this tradition begin from the premise that such informational work has exploded both quantitatively and in terms of its economic significance along with the shift towards the information society.

For liberal-democratic observers, knowledge workers are the inheritors of an enviable new peace between labour and capital in knowledge-intensive sectors such as software production, media work, and telecommunications. Their story is bolstered by the pronouncements of captains
of informational industry such as Microsoft’s Bill Gates, who famously describes our era as one of “friction-free” capitalism (1996), and Jeff Bezos of Amazon.com, who has suggested that at his company they “don’t believe in unions” because “everybody is an owner” (cited in Ross 2004, 204). If Bezos could be confused for a member of the cooperative movement, *The Economist* also extols the unprecedented power enjoyed by these workers. Since “the means of production is knowledge, which is owned by knowledge workers and is highly portable,” the publication suggests, the situation in the contemporary workplace is now one where “knowledge workers provide ‘capital’ just as much as does the provider of money. The two are dependent on each other. This makes the knowledge worker an equal—an associate or a partner” (Economist 2001).

According to this version of industrial relations, old and dependable divisions - like the one Karl Marx traced between the capitalist expropriators and the multitudes they expropriated - are progressively becoming more fluid. For Castells, in what he calls “informational” worker positions we are witnessing nothing less than a synthesis between the long-opposed forces of capital and labour. There is no easily identifiable ruling class any more, he suggests, save for the teeming ranks of knowledge workers, whom he elevates to the role of “faceless collective capitalist” of the global economy (1996, 474). In knowledge-saturated workplaces most of the collective demands made by workers in the era of industrial capitalism (job security, benefits, equality of treatment) are scorned as being incongruous with the needs of the contemporary information professional. The general tone of these dismissals is captured in the words of Harris Miller, president of the Information Technology Association of America (ITAA), who suggests, “[knowledge workers] don't want guaranteed job protection… They want flexibility to leave for more money . . . and to make out like a bandit when the company goes public. They don't want to be paid based on seniority; they want to be paid more than the person sitting the next desk over if
they're putting in more hours" (cited in Ohlson and Trombly 2000). Competition is therefore no longer something that occurs between workers and management, but between workers, all of whom now vie for individual rather than collective rewards.

This dedication on the part of knowledge workers to the corporate cause allegedly stems from the creative and rewarding nature of their labour. If Frankfurt School theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer believed that (thanks to the culture industry) entertainment had become an extension of work, liberal-democratic commentators frequently suggest that (thanks to information technology) for knowledge workers the reverse is now true. In this type of work environment, a trade union, we are told, can be little more than an abhorrent prospect. Knowledge workers “have more clout, freedom and perks," muses Kazin Isfahani, an analyst at Giga Information Group Inc. in Stamford, Connecticut - "there isn't a need for a union" (cited in Ohlson and Trombly 2000). As a Wall Street Journal Europe editorial reported triumphantly, even trade union researchers were discovering that “the composite picture of knowledge work is of a group of workers committed to their professions, confident of their own abilities to exercise independent judgment, and interested in finding a way to increase their say in key decisions” (cited in Henninger 2002). In Mountain View, California, Peter Merholz, a “creative director” for epinions inc. (a company that offers consumer reports online) adds his voice to the chorus: “a union doesn't make sense here. We're creating types of careers… that didn't exist before. We're creating job titles to handle responsibilities that didn't exist before. This community thrives on entrepreneurial spirit and it emphasizes change and flexibility… The minute you fix something in place like a union would do, you hamper your creativity and flexibility" (cited in Nesbitt 2000).

Thus, the story goes, the conditions do not exist for a resurgence of labour struggle and collective organization against management by a new generation of knowledge workers.
This dissertation is sceptical of liberal-democratic theories of knowledge work and managerial accounts of “friction-free capitalism.” In the pages that follow, I examine the ways in which emergent “knowledge worker” professions in the telecommunications and high-tech industries are subject to new regimes of exploitation and emergent modes of resistance under post-Fordism.

By post-Fordism I mean the qualitatively different economic, political, and cultural form of capitalism that has emerged across developed, G8 countries since roughly the late 1960s. While this process has occurred in different forms in different locations, it is generally marked by dramatic shifts towards service sector employment, leaner and more flexible production processes, unprecedented mobility for global capital, the expansion and intensification of communications networks, and the subsumption of language, communication and affect by economic production. My usage of the term draws primarily from the early work of Michel Aglietta (2000) on the transformation of the American economy, on David Harvey’s linkage of post-Fordist economic arrangements and postmodernity as a cultural aesthetic (1990), and Paolo Virno’s discussion of the “putting to work” of language and communication in contemporary production (2004). While not ignoring the fact that Fordist and Taylorized production methods persist globally and are indeed now being applied to knowledge-based industries as diverse as call centres and health care (Head 2003), in this dissertation I use the term post-Fordism to capture not only the economic (the passage from what Marx referred to as “formal subsumption” to “real subsumption” discussed in Chapter 7), but also the political (the shift toward neo-liberalism) and cultural (the shift towards postmodernity) features of our age.
The all-too familiar liberal-democratic story of knowledge work, I believe, is less an accurate reading of history than a pre-emptive strike, a warding off of the spectre of labour struggle within a relatively new set of professions upon which post-Fordism is increasingly dependant. As we shall see, many of the workers entering these professions have no tradition of organized labour antagonism to engage with, or as I refer to it, no collective memory of struggle to draw upon. Years of neo-liberal restructuring and its assault on the trade union movement have dealt a very serious blow to the kinds of collective experiences of labour struggle and organization that exploded during, and then took root within, Fordism. The conclusion from this fact that labour struggle is on the wane, however, is a dubious claim that frequently does little more than reveal the political position of those making it (indeed Gates and Bezos have both faced labour organizing at their companies). It is just as possible, as Dorothy Sue Cobble suggests in her discussion of collective organization and service sector workers, that the fact that established trade unionism has been slow to take root within many sectors of the new knowledge workforce is a rejection of the “particular form of unionism that is dominant today” (1996, 334) rather than collective organization in general. The “friction-free capitalism” story, by confusing labour struggle and organization in general with the difficulties of the established trade union movement in particular, operates as a kind of instant and reassuring historical memory that is always on offer for workers in these professions. Since many of the jobs that are counted as forms of “knowledge work” are relatively new, the celebratory discourse offers a non-threatening story of labour-capital relations for workers animating a set of professions which, one quickly finds, are frequently characterized by overwork, extreme insecurity, and intensifying exploitation.
The first goal of this dissertation, therefore, is to counteract such discourse by exploring and engaging exactly what it works so hard to marginalize: emergent forms of labour struggle and collective organizing by knowledge workers. In other words, the goal is one of contributing to the development of a counter-memory of the labour relations marking the information society and a furthering of the organizational practices that are most threatening to capital’s command over immaterial labour.

There are numerous traditions of inquiry to which one could turn for such a project. Over the second half of the twentieth century, one set of critical voices emanating from primarily Anglophone political economy of communication, critical labour sociology, and the trade union movement, has detailed the ongoing exploitation of workers under post-Fordist capitalism and the new forms this is taking in the realm of knowledge work. Together, these perspectives have tended to converge around the notion that knowledge work has increasingly become degraded with the advent of the information society. These dissenters, while not denying the profoundly altered nature of capitalism in its digital form (Schiller 2000), have suggested that the informational economy and its much-vaunted knowledge worker positions have become staging grounds for deskilling, surveillance, deeply vulnerable employment, low wages, and global stratification by race and gender (Mosco and Wasko 1983, Menzies 1996, Clement 1988, Costanza-Chock 2003). If liberal democrats might offer the IT employee as the ideal example of a knowledge worker, theorists of the degradation of knowledge work have directed our attention to the “netslaves” (Baldwin and Lessard 2000, 2003) of the information economy, including overworked web-designers, prison inmate call centre operators, offshore data-entry sweatshop workers, and carpal tunnel syndrome-afflicted video-game testers. Digital capitalism, these
authors suggest, in its unending drive for the extraction of profit, has generated an unstable and ruthlessly exploited “cybertariat” (Huws 2003).

The most prominent of these critics was certainly Harry Braverman, who in an immensely influential text from the 1970s, Labor and Monopoly Capital (1999), examined how for positions involving what he called “mental labour,” new forms of control and exploitation were being devised which replicated the Taylorization of manufacturing work that had inflicted the assembly line on workers in the first half of the twentieth century. Whereas knowledge workers such as the clerk had once held relatively privileged and well-remunerated positions within the smaller company of the late nineteenth century, with the arrival of what Braverman called “monopoly capitalism,” these jobs were steadily being routinized, deskillied, and generally stripped of any humanity they may have had. Mental labourers, in the process, were being transformed into an ever-growing industrial proletariat, an assessment that was in line with Marx’s historical predictions. Braverman’s work inspired a rich tradition of critical inquiry into knowledge work, laying the basis for decades of research into the processes of deskilling, surveillance and routinization of mental labour. My dissertation is indebted to this antagonistic tradition of inquiry into the condition of knowledge work. More specifically, this research is part of a burgeoning collective attempt to not only document the exploitation of knowledge workers under post-Fordism, but to inquire into and sustain the forms of resistance they are developing against it (McKercher and Mosco 2006, 2007b).

In one of his more striking passages, Braverman (1999, 104) likened this labour resistance to a “subterranean stream,” which he predicted would emerge “when the conditions permit, or when the capitalist drive for a greater intensity of labour oversteps the bounds of physical or mental
capacity.” Organized resistance, Braverman warned, is endemic to workers under capitalism. Their insubordination “renews itself in new generations, expresses itself in the unbounded cynicism and revulsion which large numbers of workers feel about their work, and comes to the fore repeatedly as a social issue demanding a solution.” Capital’s exploitation of the knowledge work performed by a growing informational proletariat, Braverman predicted, would at some point generate its own varieties of organization, a lesson from the history of labour that capital would have to learn, yet again, the hard way.

Inspired by Braverman’s metaphor of the subterranean stream, this dissertation offers an in-depth examination of the emergence of labour resistance and organization at different nodes of the informational economy. I take up his metaphor for several reasons. First, given constant discussion of the “flows” characterizing the informational economy, the image draws attention to the fact that those global flows are everywhere constituted by human labour rather than being the product of captains of industry, abstract “markets,” or our ever-improving information technology. Just as these flows are constituted by the labour that produces the information society, they are subject to the social and power relations marking this labour. Braverman’s metaphor also warns against suggesting, simply because a force is not as visible on the surface, that the conditions do not exist for it to become resurgent. Indeed, research carried out for this dissertation supports the position that we are living at a time that bears uncanny similarities to the beginning of the industrial era in 19th century Europe, with its large-scale manufacturing production (what Marx referred to as the era of “real subsumption”). Just as factory workers at the time seemed hopelessly dominated as they toiled within (and were frequently mangled by) the industrial machinery designed to exploit their labour upon threat of replacement by a massive reserve army of workers, today the informational worker appears irredeemably subordinated by
the digital call-flow systems of the contemporary call centre and the flexible employment practices of the post-Fordist labour market. Braverman’s metaphor works in the realm of research methodology as well, as my analysis of the emergence of this subterranean stream of labour resistance may include, but does not begin with, the great rivers of the established labour movement that it can feed into. Finally, water can take many shapes and forms, yet it can also cut its way through mountains – its adaptability and power are qualities that may inspire those aiming to contribute to a radical labour movement operating within and against post-Fordism.

Beginning from the conviction that it is not enough to merely refute liberal-democratic fantasies of pacified knowledge work, my dissertation examines the following questions: Under what conditions is this subterranean stream of worker resistance currently emerging? What forms of organization is it taking? What is the relationship between the type of work and the organizational forms that are being adopted by knowledge workers? Finally, which forms are the most dynamic and prefigurative of twenty-first century labour struggle?

In examining these questions I have drawn on a number of other critical perspectives, including radical feminism, marxism, and poststructuralism. Perhaps the most important to this dissertation is the tradition of theoretical inquiry and organizational practice referred to as autonomist marxism, which has paid much attention to informational workers and the *immaterial labour* they perform (Lazzarato 1997, Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004). Autonomists traditionally begin their analysis of the relations between labour and capital with resistance, a force which they famously suggest precedes and determines capitalist restructuring. The tradition’s history is, in its brightest moments, one that emerges from rank and file workers, engages with the subjectivities at play on
the shop floor, and facilitates emergent forms of resistance to and subversion of capitalist labour relations (Dyer-Witheford 1999, Wright 2002).

Borrowing from the rich lexicon of autonomist theory, I use “immaterial labour” to refer to the types of work examined in this dissertation. I understand immaterial labour as activity (waged or unwaged) that produces intangible, or immaterial, commodities, such as information, communication, or affect. Immaterial labour is an umbrella term that refers to forms of work as diverse as the labour performed by women in the household, caring labour such as nursing or social work, service work such as that carried out at a fast-food franchise outlet, and what liberal-democratic commentators call knowledge work. As we shall see in the next chapter, this term has been the subject of ongoing and rather intense debate both within and outside of the boundaries of the autonomist tradition. While acknowledging some of the term’s problems, I nonetheless use it to describe the types of work examined in this dissertation because, broad as it is, it remains the best one available and is the product of a tradition of political analysis and labour organizing that I have strong political and theoretical affinities with. For the sake of variety however, I will also use terms such as “knowledge work” “digital work” “informational labour” and others during the course of the dissertation.

Another key autonomist-inspired concept explored in this dissertation is that of labour precarity. Precarity can be broadly defined as the financial and existential insecurity arising from the flexibilization of labour. Over the last decade, radical social movements in Europe have
elaborated the concept of precarity and experimented with forms of labour organization designed to oppose it (Brophy and de Peuter 2007). Discussions of labour precarity often begin by way of a contrast to classic Fordist employment conditions: the same job for life, a stable identity rooted in one’s permanent employment, a predictable schedule, a relatively stable income, the performance of repetitive manual labour, and access to ‘welfare’ supports during periods of unemployment (Foti 2004). It is important to remember that “standard” employment has, of course, stereotypically been white, male, and middle-class (Felsted and Jewson 1999, Mitropolous 2005). In this sense the emergence of precarity as a dominant condition can be seen in many cases as a “democratization” of exploitation – a condition women, people of colour, undocumented migrants and other minorities know all too well. As we shall see, labour precarity, albeit in different ways, emerges as a key factor in each of the three inquiries, suggesting that precariousness is one of the key material axes along which immaterial labour is organized, and thus one that defines its composition.

Other features of this dissertation are influenced by my affinities with the autonomist tradition. The first is the choice of beginning an analysis of post-Fordist labour relations with an examination of contemporary forms of resistance to those relations. The second is the decision to carry this analysis out through inquiry that engages with rank and file workers, beginning its analysis of labour resistance and organizing at the lowest level of the labour hierarchy. The third is the commitment to autonomous research, that is, to inquiry that is not reliant on the assistance of, or engagement with, management from any of the companies examined.

1 This is very close to Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s definition (2000, 290), “labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication.”
Autonomist marxism enjoys its own metaphors of flows. Drawing on Marx’s analysis of the process of the circulation of capital, theorists such as Antonio Negri and Mario Tronti supplemented it during the 1960s with an analysis of the “circulation of struggles” through the cycle of capital accumulation, an epistemological and political strategy that has been adopted to great effect by subsequent generations of scholars across the globe (Bell and Cleaver 2002, Dyer-Witheford 1999). Yet while autonomists have paid a great deal of very fruitful attention to how existing struggles have the potential to circulate from one location to another, my dissertation focuses on a question that is equally vital: for digital workers with virtually no experience of collective resistance, at what moment does such resistance occur? When and how, that is, does this new generation of workers decide that the omni-present story of labour peace between them and management does not hold, and that exploitation in the call centre, on the corporate “campus”, or the temp agency is no longer tolerable? Secondly, how do these workers come into contact with other sources of historical memory, such as trade unions, political parties, and other organizations? What are some of the outcomes of this relationship and what lessons do they offer? Finally, when do immaterial labourers decide they must organize against their employers, producing their own collective historical memory in the process? When and how, in other words, does Braverman’s subterranean stream emerge, and what form does it adopt when that happens?
These questions are confronted through the prism of three in-depth inquiries into cases of resistance by immaterial labourers in Canada, the United States, and Italy. While immaterial labour comprises different types of work (including domestic labour, sex work and service work), the central task of this dissertation is to critique the aforementioned liberal-democratic celebrations of knowledge work, and hopefully contribute towards undermining the types of exploitation these theories tacitly support. As a result, the three inquiries focus on struggles emerging a) from types of labour that are clear examples of “knowledge work” as described by liberal-democratic observers, and b) from within industries (telecommunications and high tech) commonly identified in celebratory narratives as the natural habitat of these workers.

Each of the three examples of struggle offers a different model of organizing by workers engaged in varieties of immaterial labour. In the United States I interviewed members of the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers (WashTech), formed in 1998 by Microsoft contract employees in Redmond, Washington with the assistance of the Communication Workers of America. WashTech is an “open source” union, offering continuous membership across discontinuous periods of employment for workers in the high-tech industry. In Canada, my research brought me to Moncton, New Brunswick, where I met call-centre workers at Aliant who in 2001 certified a bargaining unit through the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union and subsequently struck the telecommunications company. In Italy, I spent time with the Collettivo PrecariAtesia, a group of Roman call-centre workers on “parasubordinate” temporary contracts who organized their own rank and file collective and achieved a permanent contract for workers at Atesia, Europe’s largest call centre, in 2007.
To set the stage for these inquiries, Chapter 2 examines three theoretical perspectives on emergent forms of work within post-Fordism. Liberal-democratic theories of knowledge work, sociological/political-economic theories of the degradation of knowledge work, and autonomist theories of immaterial labour are presented and assessed so as to offer a context for the struggles at the heart of the dissertation. Each tradition offers a set of debates with its own historical roots and political perspectives, ones I do my best to examine the evolution and complexities of. While these traditions are perhaps not as neatly divided in reality as I have presented them to be, considering each approach in turn strengthens the analysis in subsequent chapters.

Having established a theoretical context and a political vocabulary for the analysis of different forms of immaterial labour, Chapter 3 considers the ethical questions, epistemological foundations, and methodological choices involved in carrying out such an inquiry. Beginning with the concept of immanence as it is developed in the work of the seventeenth century philosopher Spinoza, I explore a series of subterranean sociological traditions that have placed an emphasis on partisan research, embodied perspectives, and an engagement with struggles rather than claiming positions of political neutrality, empirical objectivity or epistemological purity. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the research methods adopted in the three inquiries.

In chapters 4, 5 and 6, I examine the cases of the Microsoft, Aliant, and Atesia workers in turn. Here I draw heavily on 35 interviews conducted in Seattle, Moncton, and Rome between 2005 and 2007, but also on historical/archival research into the different political economic contexts, industries, and labour traditions of each. Workers participated in every step of the process of formulating these three chapters, from reviewing transcripts of their interviews to suggesting changes to draft versions.
The dissertation concludes by asking what lessons can we take from these inquiries, not as intellectuals pondering a problem from a detached position, but as workers and labour organizers implicated in the very same processes of the increasingly flexible exploitation of our immaterial labour. Chapter 7 closes, therefore, by confronting two questions: a) What are the key tendencies characterizing the moments in which the stream of labour resistance overflows its banks, flooding its intended channels, and b) how can these tendencies be used strategically for those aiming to further collective organizing by immaterial labour? In asking these questions, therefore, it suggests that this project of inquiry into the category of immaterial labour, much like the forms of labour resistance and organization it engages with and supports, is only just beginning.
Chapter 2
From the Knowledge Worker to Immaterial Labour

“The white collar people slipped quietly into society” notes C. Wright Mills in the opening passage of one of the earliest comprehensive studies of the mysterious set of professions emerging at the heart of American Fordism. His disquiet at the arrival of this new subject, his sense of betrayal at the white collar worker’s lack of a class politic, stands in marked opposition to the often heavy burden of historical hope placed on its shoulders by the traditions we shall examine in this chapter. This notwithstanding, Mills’ 1954 text, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (2002), confronts key questions that would be the subject of struggle for over half a century afterwards: Who were these new workers, so markedly different from the industrial factory labourers that were becoming a part of the organization of firms, sociological discourse, economics, party politics, and collective organizing? How to begin to understand their composition and proclivities? And what, most importantly, was this subject’s historical role?

This chapter offers an overview of three approaches to the new labouring subject of digital capitalism. While not absolutely distinct traditions, liberal-democratic theories of knowledge work, sociological/political economic theories of the degradation of labour, and autonomist theories of immaterial labour each approach and explain emergent forms of work differently. Thus while there is certainly much diversity within (and occasional cross-fertilization among) these perspectives, for the purposes of this dissertation it is best to treat them as separate,
reasonably coherent traditions, marked by tangibly different epistemological approaches and political positions. These clusters of reflection on communicative labour developed during the course of the Cold War as deep political fault lines dividing the Soviet and American empires marked world politics after World War II. Each tradition theorizes a transition between different models of capitalism, although the reasons offered for the shift vary. Most importantly, these perspectives have focused on the changes occurring across the capitalist West from the late 1960s within the Fordist organization of work, and the concomitant explosion of a set of professions involving a host of different activities, rhythms, and modes of organization.

These approaches are important for another reason: not only do they offer important ways of thinking about digital labour, but are themselves the result of the same historical tensions and lines of force as the case studies analyzed in chapters 4-7. This is not to suggest that the traditions are “merely” ideological results of their respective historical contexts. Each tradition (like ideology) is immediately material, having played its own constituent role in the case studies examined below. Indeed if the literature surrounding the “knowledge worker” played a key part in restructuring Microsoft, autonomist theory and practice helped organize resistance at the Atesia call centre in Rome, and theories of the degradation of knowledge work have informed labour responses to telecommunications restructuring in Canada and the United States. These

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2 This epistemological approach is deliberate, and, as mentioned, comes with its own set of problems (the risk of caricature, the obscuring of intellectual and political cross-fertilization). There are certainly other ways to divide this field of thought. Frank Webster (1995), for example, has divided theories of the information society into believers in epochal change and deniers of this change. For the purposes of this dissertation, however, I prefer to divide perspectives on knowledge work according to their respective epistemological approaches and political positions, as these inform engagement with work and the power relations between capital and labour in the workplace.
approaches are thus central to understanding emerging forms of collective organization, or compositions, within the set of professions that make up immaterial labour.

A disclaimer seems necessary however. This overview is neither a comprehensive nor an exhaustive account of the many lines of inquiry into the large-scale transformations occurring within the world of labour and the concomitant growth of new professions within it. Were it even possible, such an approach would of course need to take into account the theories emerging on the other side of the Iron Curtain and in what used to be called the Third World. In addition, particular countries and regions have their own micro-traditions. Researchers such as Dan Schiller (1996, 71) and Sergio Bologna (2007) have illustrated, for example, the rich tradition of analysis surrounding the division between “mental” and “manual” labour in Germany from the turn of the twentieth century through to the Weimar Republic, as well as how this impacted Anglophone theory after World War II.³ Put simply, there is no paucity of writing on the subject, and this chapter does not claim to represent the totality of this work.

Even having delimited the analysis to a survey of the three identified traditions however, the literature examined spans at least fifty years, two continents (North America and Europe), several genres (from popular to management to activist pamphlets to academic tomes), and varied political positions. Given the mass, depth, and articulation of the debates surrounding emergent forms of knowledge work, and, more importantly, that this dissertation deals with instances of collective organization within its ranks, I will be paying particular attention to two moments
within each tradition: 1) how they approach and define knowledge work and 2) how they discuss (or neglect to discuss) the organization enacted upon and by this new subject. Along the way I look at the manner in which they each construct their dreams for and fears of the future on the shoulders of the knowledge worker.

2.1 Liberal-Democratic Theories of the Knowledge Worker

This section traces the emergence and development of the knowledge worker in the work of liberal-democratic thinkers such as management theorist Peter Drucker, economist Fritz Machlup, sociologist Daniel Bell, ex-US Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, and others. As the world split into two great camps after World War II, what radical communication theorist Armand Mattelart (2003) calls the “end of ideology” discourse permeated the intellectual production of these and other prominent thinkers across the capitalist West, finding its natural epicenter in America. It

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3 A key product of the analysis of the transformation of labour was Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s (1977) reflections on mental labour and epistemology in *Intellectual and manual labour: A critique of epistemology*.

4 This tradition, the broadest of the ones I will examine, is composed of numerous other works by thinkers both academic and popular. As I will suggest, it achieved a strong presence within academia, management, and policy-making circles by the 1970s. It also, however, became an accepted part of media discourse, and by the 1990s was one of the key tributaries of the mythic constructions of cyberspace that exploded during the new economy (Mosco 2004). The breadth of the tradition is underscored by the fact that Steven Brint (2001) is able to identify no less than three sub-traditions within its academic variant. Unfortunately he presents these as the sum total of theories on the knowledge worker, ignoring alternative traditions such as the ones we will examine in the remainder of this chapter.

5 The discussions they were a part of had a number of national correlates. For that which took place in France during the late sixties, see Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2006). Boltanski and Chiapello carry out a compelling work of historical sociology, examining the roots of contemporary French post-Fordism by tracing the emergence of a (Footnote continues on following page)
has become common in critical political-economic analyses of “post-industrialism” or the “information society” to preface one’s discussions (and subsequent critique) by pointing out that these thinkers have spoken from powerful institutional sites,\(^6\) contributing to the construction of what has become a hegemonic understanding of the types of labour fueling the information society (Webster 1995, Mattelart 2003). While this is certainly true, it is also important to remember that, in the beginning, these theorists’ ideas were not a part of the accepted mainstream discourse on labour prevailing in their respective fields after WWII. It is only over the course of four decades (and after a cycle of revolt during the late sixties) that their theories of knowledge work became an accepted paradigm, and fed into post-Fordist restructuring.

Early liberal-democratic theorists of the knowledge worker certainly had no love for the Soviet system, which for some among them (Daniel Bell is the most obvious example) had left the bitter taste of socialist dreams betrayed. Yet they also sensed that the Fordist compromise that Western capital had settled upon, premised as it was upon the rigid mass production of material commodities, their equally rigid mass consumption, and ugly, barely containable rounds of industrial struggle, was insufficient, already retrograde when measured up against their hopes for and visions of a society to come. Above all they distrusted the ways in which this political-economic compromise was manifest in the accepted parameters of debate of their fields, whether it was the social sciences, management, or economics.

\(^6\) Daniel Bell (1999, civ), in the prologue to *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, refers to a 1970 conference organized by himself and Ralf Dahrendorf and sponsored by the “International Association for Cultural Freedom.” Armand Mattelart (2003, 73-75) reminds us that in 1955 Bell, Friedrich von Hayek, and other capitalist subversives attended a conference on the “Future of (Footnote continues on following page)
This sense of dissatisfaction fed into a body of work that has, with some consistency through the decades, analyzed existing trends in the world of labour and fervently projected them into the future. As a result, the tone uniting these writers is that of a sometimes lucid, sometimes delirious optimism. Politically, they tend strongly towards a liberal democratic position, that is, one that broadly affirms a form of social order in which representative democracy is united with capitalist markets. As Marxists across the planet placed their bets on the mass worker of Fordist capitalism, from the fifties onwards these restless liberal democrats found an ally in their struggle, if not the protagonist of it, in the figure of the knowledge worker, for whom they have held an enduring fascination. For liberal-democratic theorists of the knowledge worker history is certainly not over (Francis Fukuyama is one of their least careful thinkers), but its starring roles are certainly up for grabs in a world driven by informational flows.

Liberal-democratic analyses of knowledge work hinge on three key points: 1) they begin their analysis with a focus on the development of, and interplay between, information technology and markets, making a strong qualitative distinction between the knowledge work that emerges and the industrial manufacturing labour that is being displaced as a result of this catalytic interaction.

Vincent Mosco has carried out some of the most sustained investigation of the structure of feeling characterizing the shift toward an information society, one he refers to as the “digital sublime” (2004). The thinkers I am examining in this section are without a doubt internal to the broader set of writing surrounding the large-scale social restructuring and the role of information technology within that restructuring. Nonetheless, here I am focusing on specific treatments of the changes occurring within work rather than the economy at large. I also focus on the more lucid analyses of social transformations within labour rather than the deliriously optimistic, as the former are generally more useful for the purposes of this dissertation’s project, that is, to better understand emerging forms of organization within the ranks of immaterial labour.
propelling capitalism in its postindustrial phase; 2) the result of this combination, they suggest, is that emergent forms of labour in the “knowledge society” (as Drucker called it) tend (and ought) to be characterized by the lessening of hierarchy, or at the very least by a meritocratic as opposed to an egalitarian structure; 3) this tendency is contrasted with what they generally treat as moribund antagonisms (class struggle and its attendant ideological battles above all) and their traditional vehicles (the established trade union movement).

2.1.1 Information and Markets

Liberal-democratic theories of the knowledge worker posit a split between the industrial economy, which for them is based primarily on material resources used in the production of material commodities, and the postindustrial or knowledge economy, in which the main resource is knowledge or information. Peter Drucker, who attended John Maynard Keynes’ lectures at Cambridge before immigrating to America and playing a key role in developing the discipline of management, is often said to be the first person to have used the term “knowledge worker” (The Economist, 2005b). If arguments over origins are rarely fruitful, the 1959 book the term appears in, Landmarks of Tomorrow: A Report on the New ‘Post-Modern’ World (1999) is a good example of the sensibility shared by these thinkers, a yearning to explain history’s direction through an analysis of the powerful encounter they saw between capitalist markets and rapidly advancing information technology. The result of this explosive interaction (one in which capital’s power of command and labour’s potential for resistance both take a back seat) is unbridled progress within the world of labour. The most shining example of this is to be found in the quintessential figure of emergent knowledge economies, the knowledge worker, who Drucker (1992, 264) defines as "the man or woman who applies to productive work ideas, concepts, and information rather than manual skill or brawn." The task for those managing America’s
corporations, he suggested with ongoing vigour since the mid-fifties, was to adapt to this new kind of worker and the future it prefigured, to develop new ways in which to harness their uniquely creative labour power and the technology through which it could be actualized.

Around the time Drucker ushered the knowledge worker into management lexicon, economist Fritz Machlup was engaged in an analogous project in his own discipline. In his early classic text, *The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States* (1962, 6), Machlup suggests that:

> As an economy develops and as a society becomes more complex, efficient organization of production, trade, and government seems to require an increasing degree of division of labor between knowledge production and physical production. A quite remarkable increase in the division of labor between pure ‘brain work’ and largely physical performance has occurred in all sectors of our economic and social organization.

The use of “seems to require” betrays an implicit faith in the emerging economic system whose signs he was reading. Unfortunately for Machlup, the manner in which “knowledge” was being articulated within economic discourse in the post-war period could hardly be satisfactory to those who, like him, were beginning to peer past a Fordist organization of society.8 He does note that the economists of the period are increasingly devoting their attention to the “analysis of economic growth and development”, within which the “burst of activity in studying the productivity of investment in knowledge” was becoming a marked trend (Ibid, 5). Yet this research, with its focus on abstract injections of an alien “knowledge” into the firm, missed, as it were, the forest for the trees. For Machlup knowledge was becoming *fully immanent* to the economy, something

8 Knowledge was understood predominantly as an investment in production at the firm level or, in other less common instances, as the emergent subject of market research.
that would necessitate a conceptual “promotion” as he puts it, from the “rank of an exogenous independent variable to that of an endogenous variable dependent on input” (Ibid).

While suggesting that it was not possible to draw a clear and incontrovertible line between “physical” and “mental” labour, Machlup pointed out that “for theoretical as well as practical purposes it is possible to make the distinction between physical and mental operations, and between predominantly physical and mental labour” (Ibid, 379). This fraught division between head and hand brought with it a whole set of ontological and epistemological problems that will be familiar to those who have followed the debates on knowledge work or “white-collar work” over the last five decades (ones I discuss further in Chapter 2). The problem for Machlup and others within academic disciplines (Drucker was rarely bound by the need to prove anything empirically) became one of proving a hunch: how to count these knowledge workers, to ascertain in fact not only that they existed, but that they were growing in number and importance within the American post-War economy?

For Machlup the project of counting the growing number of brainworkers and measuring their importance to the American economy meant that methodologically it would not be possible to stay “within the confines of economics” (Ibid, 10), an intellectual discipline that was becoming inadequate to this end. Reading his book, one feels there is a sense of urgency to his project, one that requires him to explore new methods and concepts. “There is evidence of a change in the composition of the labor force employed in the United States, in particular of an increase in the share of knowledge-producing labor in total employment,” (Ibid, 9), a trend which, Machlup implied, suggested a deeper structural change within American society. In order to grasp this change however, economists needed to take a leap of faith, revolutionize their discipline, and
accept that the “production of knowledge is an economic activity, an industry, if you like” (Ibid). A future economy, fueled by labour based upon knowledge, communication, and their attendant technologies, was in the making.⁹

This sense of coming economic transformation and the need to adapt to it also pervades the work of one of the most well known explicators of knowledge work, Daniel Bell. For Bell, who was by the seventies writing in the eye of the maelstrom of restructuring towards post-Fordism, what he called “post-industrial society” was not an already-extant state, but rather an emergent condition that would take shape over the next thirty to fifty years. The Harvard sociologist famously divided human history into three distinct phases (agricultural, industrial, and post-industrial), of which he suggested we are entering the last. Its predominant form of labour indelibly marks each phase. If in the first stage labour activities are primarily “extractive” and a “game against nature,” and in industrial society work is a “game against fabricated nature,” in post-industrial society work is laden with “information activities” (1979, 178), and, in a compelling formulation, becomes a “game between persons” (1999, 127). These varieties of work and the mode of societal organization they subtended undoubtedly had utopian qualities for Bell, beginning with a “new consciousness” in which a “communal society” would promote the “community rather than the individual” (Ibid, 128).

⁹ Machlup’s discussion of knowledge anticipates in an uncanny fashion some of the debates that would gather strength during the 1970s within North American feminism and Italian workerism around the notion of productive and unproductive labour (see Weeks 2007). At his most revolutionary, Machlup’s approach is predicated on exploding the division between productive and unproductive knowledge, suggesting that “ever so often they are joint products” and that “non-productive” work is actually often quite productive (1962, 6). This is an insight that, arguably, anticipates contemporary analyses of “free labour” (Terranova 2004).
The new types of labour that were emerging within the historical transformation, these games between people that did not produce a tangible product, were primarily to be found within five economic sectors: personal services (retail stores, laundries, garages, beauty shops), business services (banking and finance, real estate, insurance), transportation, communication and utilities, and health, education, research and government. This new kind of worker, according to Bell, operated on the basis of an “axial principle” characterizing post-industrial society: like Machlup before him, Bell located this principle in the increasing importance of theoretical knowledge (Ibid, 18).

By the latter half of the seventies when Bell published The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (1976), liberal-democratic theories of the knowledge worker were becoming accepted wisdom. Indeed as corporate America was challenged by the counterculture, the civil rights movement and labour organizing in the late sixties, the combination of exhortations by figures such as Drucker, policy reports such as Work in America (Special Task Force to the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1973) that denounced the “disgruntlement of white-collar workers,” and popular accounts such as Studs Terkel’s Working (1974) - in which he referred to the “white collar moan” that was audible across America (cited in Ross 2004, 6) - fueled a series of management initiatives to “humanize” the knowledge-based workplace during the 1970s.

The quest to skewer the “information worker” empirically and measure the growth Machlup had glimpsed almost twenty years before continued under Marc Uri Porat, who by that point was working under the aegis of the American state. And while noting that, in what had become a customary disclaimer, “stating precisely who is an information worker and who is not is a risky proposition” (1977, 5), Porat was not discouraged from carrying out his own taxonomy of
informational occupations, divided into three categories according to the informational content of their work:

The first category includes those workers whose output as primary activity is producing and selling knowledge. Included here are scientists, inventors, teachers, librarians, journalists, and authors. The second major class of workers covers those who gather and disseminate information. These workers move information within firms and within markets; they search, coordinate, plan and process market information. Included here are managers, secretaries, clerks, lawyers, brokers, and typists. The last class includes workers who operate the information machines and technologies that support the previous two activities. Included here are computer operators, telephone installers, and television repairers. (Ibid, 5-6)

Indeed as the exploration of the knowledge worker continued unperturbed into the accomplished neoliberalism of the 1980s, the same methodological problems continued to surface in these empirical assessments. An Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) research team underscored this at the beginning of the 1980s, when they admitted “universal agreement as to the precise inventory of occupations to be designated as ‘informational’ is of course unlikely (OECD 1981, 3).

As the knowledge worker discourse gradually moved from subversive margins to the hegemonic center of academic, policy, and business institutions, there have been increasingly complex attempts to describe what is and is not knowledge work. Among these, ex-Clinton administration Secretary of Labor Robert Reich’s portrayal of the “symbolic analyst” (1991), sociologist Manuel Castells’ discussion of the “informational labour” (1996), and popular author Richard Florida’s discussion of the “creative class” (2002) have refined older theories of the knowledge worker and introduced greater complexity into their portrayal, creating different
categories within what Reich calls the “jobs of the future.” These more recent definitions of the new labouring subject are notable for their tortuous attempts to reconcile the aforementioned spirit of optimism over what the interface between capitalist markets and information technology would produce with the increasingly apparent hierarchy and exploitation occurring within the organization of immaterial labour.\textsuperscript{10}

2.1.2 The End of Hierarchy

If arguments over whether knowledge workers existed and how to count them steadily became a moot point over the course of the seventies, the debate over how they were to be organized within American business began to heat up as these liberal-democratic theories became part of an increasingly dominant discourse surrounding work. The search for the most fruitful way of organizing informational labour was certainly not without a history, especially in Britain and America. Charles Babbage (1832) had advocated the split between conception and execution very early on (in his chapter entitled “On the division of mental labour” in \textit{On the Economy of Machinery and Manufactures}), and proto-workflow architects such as William Henry Leffingwell had, since the beginning of the twentieth century, encouraged the rigorous application of Taylorist scientific management to American brainworkers in his \textit{Scientific Office Management} (1917). But for many liberal-democratic theorists the dawn of a new era of history was incompatible with the disciplinary and callous extraction of value from labourers. Creating value in the knowledge economy was not about the prosaic concerns that filled the pages of

\footnote{Nonetheless, simple and tautological definitions of knowledge work persist in popular literature and elsewhere, almost fifty years after Peter Drucker coined the term. Thomas Davenport, a key architect of workforce reengineering, in his book about managing the knowledge worker, defines (Footnote continues on following page)
Leffingwell’s book, such as how often mail-order clerks’ inkwells were to be filled up, or how to route mail through their companies. If America’s companies wanted to keep up with the knowledge economy, liberal democratic theorists maintained, they would have to progressively eliminate older forms of hierarchy and allow knowledge workers to march to the beat of their own drum to the greatest extent possible.

Again Drucker provides a useful starting point when liberal-democratic considerations regarding the organization of knowledge workers are considered. As far back as 1954, he suggested that existing management practices at America’s most iconic companies were woefully inadequate when compared to the future whose landmarks he was busy discerning. The key to running a good business was not to rule this new worker with fear (which as a motivation is “far too potent to be relied upon except in emergencies” (2006, 264) or maximize intellectual output by rendering their work unspeakably boring, but rather to employ the soul of the worker in the business and harness their unmitigated participation in the workforce (Ibid.). As he suggests, in an uncanny anticipation of what Foucault would later call biopower, the disciplinary apparatus of fear must be done away with and “we must create a positive motivation to take its place” (Ibid, 265). Therefore, work must be organized “in such a manner that whatever strength, initiative, responsibility, and competence there is in individuals becomes a source of strength and performance for the whole group” (Ibid, 265-266). Indeed in the writing of most of these thinkers, the knowledge worker, when left to her own devices, appears as innately self-organizing. More importantly, this self-organization is actually the source, rather than the result, of the new subject’s strange power. The road to the complete establishment of the knowledge

the worker’s primary task as involving “the manipulation of knowledge and information” (cited (Footnote continues on following page)
economy is paved, therefore, with a lessening of hierarchy and the emergence of a new meritocracy, where knowledge workers can affirm themselves on their own terms. Drucker supported the flattening of companies for the whole of his life. This change in structure would, in a deeply utopian vision, bleed out into the rest of life and eventually annihilate societal class differences: “the new organization creates a new social structure,” Drucker said, a “society composed entirely of the middle class of employed professionals” (1999, 98-99, emphasis added). Forty years later, there had been little change in the management theorist’s outlook: “the knowledge society is a society of seniors and juniors,” he suggested towards the end of his life, “rather than of bosses and subordinates” (2001, 9). Such a vision could not have been in greater opposition to Marx’s proletarianization thesis, a vision, which, Drucker claimed, “mirrored the past rather than predicted the future” (1999, 104).

2.1.3 The Self-Organization of Knowledge Work

If Drucker’s fantasy of a classless society was always among the most unlikely readings of the direction of capitalist labour markets and the structure of society more generally, a host of more sober liberal-democratic analyses of trends within the organization of knowledge work have emerged since the 1990s. These studies have had the increasingly difficult job of reconciling the indelible optimism that marks the genre with the ugly feeling that exploitation is going nowhere, a tension that has progressively generated a somewhat schizophrenic quality in the discourse. This sensibility surfaces in the sections dedicated to the analysis of labour in Manuel Castells’

in The Economist 2005a).
discussion of the network society (1996, 201-311), an imposing sociological analysis of nothing less than the accomplishment of Machlup and Drucker’s distant visions of a fluid capitalist world moved by markets and information technology. The research summarized in his dense trilogy confirms that, as he elegantly states, there is “greater informational content in the occupational structure of advanced societies” (Ibid, 218), since contemporary companies “organize their production system around the principle of maximizing knowledge-based productivity through the development and diffusion of information technologies” (Ibid, 204). If in this passage he implies that corporations organize their knowledge workers as an almost inert factor of production, elsewhere Castells suggests that labour remains “at the core of social structure” and is “the main lever by which the information paradigm and the process of globalization affect society at large” (Ibid, 201).

What’s more, for Castells the fundamental reorganization of production towards the information age leads to more empowerment, not less, for workers. He too sees scientific management as a residual form of the organization of labour, one that he implies is unfit for knowledge workers: “It is the Taylorist assembly line that becomes a historic relic (although it’s still a harsh reality for millions of workers in the industrializing world)” (Ibid, 242). His subject of the present/future, the “networker”, is the “necessary agent of the network enterprise made possible by new information technologies” (Ibid, 242, emphasis added). Castells lauds the information technology used by the networker in that it calls “for greater freedom and better-informed workers to deliver the full promise of its productivity potential” (Ibid). Work that requires “analysis, decision, and reprogramming capabilities in real time at a level that only the human brain can master” is enhanced rather than degraded in the network society (Ibid).
It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Castells is, according to the *Economist*, “the person who has straddled the world of social theory and Silicon Valley most successfully” (1999). Indeed it is in the jobs that emerged from the Valley-driven tech boom (particularly in Internet startups) that, as Andrew Ross (2004, 9) has demonstrated, the most prominent legacy of the workplace reform movement, called for by people such as Drucker, is to be found. The notion that knowledge workers must be allowed to actively participate in the organization of the company indelibly marked the discourse of the New Economy, and has persisted long after the debris of the dotcom bust was carted away. A quote from a recent *Economist* (2006) article is exemplary:

…in small ways, technology is already helping big firms to treat their employees more like partners. IBM recently held a 72-hour online chat session (which it called a “jam”) among employees from 75 different countries to discuss the company’s values, and plans to hold more. “Jams enable a kind of mass collaboration and problem-solving that has simply never before been possible on a global scale,” says Irving Wladawsky-Berger, the company’s vice-president of technical strategy and innovation.

Yet despite all the backslapping and future peddling emanating from the private sector, careful liberal-democratic observers such as Castells cannot ignore the fact that, at least for now, large portions of knowledge work are demonstrating obvious signs of hierarchy, drudgery, and exploitation. Knowledge worker theorists are marked by their habit of warding off such signs of strife, generally by projecting it into the past, characterizing them as a diseased legacy of the 20th century which an inoculated digital age is sure to overcome. Within the network society, “authoritarian management and exploitative capitalism” are “formidable obstacles” (1996, 242) in Castells’ view, perhaps betraying his belief that there is, nonetheless, some kind of collective and desirable historical path we are on. For the time being however, he points out that in terms of “capacity to input the decision-making process” workers remain stratified, differentiating between “deciders,” “participants,” and “executants” (Ibid, 244).
This acknowledgement of uncertainty and unease with the contemporary condition of the knowledge worker is prevalent in later examples of liberal-democratic theories, including the work of Robert Reich (1991) and Richard Florida (2002). If for the former “symbolic analysts” have “partners or associates rather than bosses or supervisors” (1991, 178) and the “old hierarchies are breaking down” (Ibid, 182), there persist unfortunate problems in the world of work, including the possibility that symbolic analysts might use their power for evil rather than good. A happy ending for the story of globalization is to be ensured, for Reich, by organizing the market “in ways that motivate symbolic analysts to discover means of helping mankind [sic] while inflicting the least harm” (Ibid, 186). Richard Florida has similar concerns, stressing the “great dilemma of our time” is that “having generated such incredible creative potential” in the person of the creative class, “we lack the broader social and economic system to fully harness it and put it to use” (2002, xiii). In addition, outside of the symbolic analysts and creative classers, these thinkers have been forced to point out that the overwhelming majority of workers remain trapped in a dead-end service economy.

Despite the fact that these writers regularly promote the flattening of hierarchy and encourage worker participation in the destiny of the company and capitalism at large, they are far from anarcho-syndicalists. The most obvious reminders of this are those moments when they consider the relationship between digital workers and the remnants of the industrial workforce. For Daniel Bell knowledge professionals were to be a sort of capitalist vanguard within the transformation towards a post-industrial society, a benign “new intelligentsia” (1999, 15) who would become hegemonic within labour and the ordering of society. Indeed despite his utopian impulses, Bell believed that if post-industrial society was to be organized around knowledge and knowledge
work, this was still “for the purpose of social control and the directing of innovation and change” (Ibid, 15). This repressed desire for discipline persists in managerial musings of how to organize workflow across new and old labouring subjects. The very same *Economist* article that discusses the IBM “jam” participation-fest also earnestly muses that “today's complex firm may need a new matrix, with one structure for its knowledge workers and another for its more traditional workforce” (2006).

Even when the organization of the knowledge worker is considered independently from that of her throwback of a factory-working colleague, the very same literature lauding the former’s self-organizing potential is replete with vaguely schizophrenic returns to the need to extend business’ dominion over her work. Indeed despite his communist overtones, Drucker himself was under no illusions as to what the field he is often credited with inventing entailed: “Management is the organ of institutions...the organ that converts a mob into an organization, and human efforts into performance” (cited in the *Economist* 2005a). Thus the knowledge worker can row at will, as long as it is in the right direction.

In the course of the establishment of liberal-democratic discourses surrounding knowledge work, within management literature discussion of the figure has also become a lot more mundane and disciplinary in its goal of quantifying and managing certain portions of the immaterial production process. For Drucker, "to make knowledge work productive will be the great management task of this century, just as to make manual work productive was the great management task of the last century" (1992, 290). This echoes Bell, who in his tome on post-industrialism warned that the new technocrats would give rise to new social relationships and new structures” which posed “management” problems for the political system (1999, 13). Thomas
Davenport, leading workplace reengineer of the nineties and author of the book *Managing Knowledge Workers: New Skills and Attitudes to Unlock the Intellectual Capital in Your Organization* (2005), is concerned with exactly Drucker’s dilemma, suggesting that finding ways to measure the output of knowledge workers in order to make them more productive is “one of the most important economic issues of our time” (cited in the Economist 2005a). Yet he is more cold-blooded than his predecessor, having advocated routinization, surveillance, and the division of the knowledge workforce into the performance of “operational” versus “managerial” processes (see Head 2004, 70, 74, 157-159) during the nineties.

### 2.1.4 Collective Organization and the Knowledge Worker

If the question of whether the knowledge worker ought to be allowed to self-organize within accepted limits or simply be disciplined through hierarchical organization becomes an open one towards the latter half of the liberal-democratic trajectory, conspicuously under-represented, or more usually absent, is discussion of knowledge worker collective organization *against*, rather than *by*, capital. If the organized labour union movement was a protagonist in the drama of industrial society, these thinkers generally suggest, everywhere there are signs that this will not be the case for humanity’s next phase. In *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, Bell suggested that the historic shift posed “a serious problem” for the trade-union movement since, he noted with studied detachment, unions had shown themselves to be incapable of organizing white-collar and technical workers (1999, 137). The obvious implication here is that knowledge workers do not *want* to organize, or at the very least that they seem to not want to organize *against* capital through a union.
The difficulties of organizing white-collar workers, for Bell, were those of labour in general in the maintenance of its adversarial relations with capital, and spelled in no uncertain terms the end of the line for those who were hitching their hopes to Marxism’s explanatory power. Although the latter had “sensed the urgency of the structural changes in the society”, according to Bell they had also become “tediously theological in their debates about the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ working class, for their aim is not to illuminate actual changes in the society but to ‘save’ the Marxist concept of social change” (Ibid, 39-40). True as this may have been, with respect to the organization of knowledge workers in general, however, some question marks did remain about how the ongoing interaction between markets and information technology might affect work. For Bell, chief among these was “to what extent… the entry of a new young, educated work force creates a very different psychology and new kinds of demands about the character of work” (Ibid, 144). Like Castells, Bell reveals himself a more acute observer in the tradition when he notes that political organization as such was not excluded from future embodiments of knowledge work: “the organization of professionals will be a major feature of post industrial society, as the organization of skilled and semi-skilled workers was characteristic of industrial society. What form these organizations take remains to be seen” (Ibid, 145).

If Bell is measured as to the reduction of labour struggle in the information society, other liberal-democratic treatments are generally more dismissive. Robert Reich offers a discussion of the union-form that ends with its incorporation as “an established political and economic institution” (1992, 57) during the course of American Fordism. Comparing the last scene of the 1930s cultural front play Waiting for Lefty (which ended with the call for a “Strike, strike, strike!”) with the resolution of the 1954 Broadway hit Pajama Game, (which ended with the
company president coming to his senses, offering his workers a raise, and thus staving off labour struggle), Reich implies that unions have served their historical purpose, one that was extinguished with the demise of Fordism. In contrast to his keen and extended discussion of the “jobs of the future”, organized labour is allotted a mere two pages in his book, and referred to exclusively in the past tense.

Commentators across the breadth of liberal-democratic perspectives on knowledge work are similarly dismissive of the notion of knowledge workers organizing themselves in a manner that is antagonistic to capital. As sampled in the introduction, the barons of the digital age have been quick to adopt the most extreme perspectives regarding the disappearance of labour struggle from the future. Japanese futurist Yoneji Masuda (2004, 17) similarly effaces organized labour, suggesting, in lapidary fashion, that:

In industrial society labour unions exist as a force of social change, and labour movements expand by the use of labour disputes as their weapon. In the information society, citizen movements will be the force behind the social change; their weapons will be litigation and participatory movements.

While it would be relatively easy to dismiss Masuda and other pop-predictions for the disappearance of collective organization by knowledge workers for themselves rather than for capital, I would like to end the examination of liberal-democratic theories of knowledge work with a different sort of consideration. That is that the possibility of the resurgence of struggles in and around the field of labour is for these authors (and business owners) a spectral presence, one that their proclamations are in fact intended to exorcise. The story of knowledge work that they offer, therefore, operates as what Judith Butler might call a “regulatory fiction” (1990) that has the effect of effacing struggles in the sphere of labour.
As with most things repressed, labour strife nonetheless surfaces in their writing. In Castells’ work, for example, the ghoul appears when he suggests that the network society “is not an ideal world, exempt of conflicts” (1996, 246). The emergence of the informational paradigm chosen as the entry point for liberal-democratic analyses still “does not tell the whole story of labour and workers in our societies,” he points out, admitting that “the social context, and particularly the relationship between capital and labor… drastically affects the actual shape of the work process and the consequences of the change for workers” (Ibid, 249). There is little question that Castells offers an accurate picture of the restructuring of work throughout the chapter, including the generation of a “white-collar proletariat” (Ibid, 229) and the growing bifurcation between “core” and “disposable” (Ibid, 272) labour forces. Yet not only is the relationship between labour and capital secondary in his account, but labour struggle has virtually no room in his over 100-page treatment of labour in the information society, filled as it is with dispassionate comments on the “painful adjustment” to the informational paradigm (Ibid, 265), “vulnerable” workers (Ibid, 279), and subtle signs of his admiration for the social peace brought about through the relationship between management and company unions (Ibid, 246, 271). As with Bell however, in Castells’ work the potential for future conflict between labour and capital is ultimately examined via an analysis of the errors and declining strength of established trade unions,11 a strategy which not only marks the Fordist labour union as an animal that is sick and dying, but, most crucially, effaces forms of struggle which do not conform to it.

11 “Labor unions, the main obstacle to a one-sided restructuring strategy, were weakened by their inadaptability to representing new kinds of workers (women, youth, immigrants), to acting in new work places (private sector offices, high-technology industries), and to functioning in the new forms of organization (the network enterprise on a global scale)” (1996, 278).
Liberal-democratic theories of knowledge contain, at their heart, a deep ambivalence. They declare their desire to abandon the misery of the Taylorist assembly line for knowledge workers, replacing it with expanded opportunities for autonomy, creativity and invigorating challenges in the contemporary workplace. This, they suggest, is the inevitable result of the new motor of history, the combination between expanding markets on one hand and the staggering advances in information technology on the other, a result to which everyone, from the manager to the worker, will have to adapt. At the same time however, the smartest observers among them cannot ignore that this idealized workplace, if it is occurring, is the case for only a very small fraction of those working with their brains under post-Fordism. In addition, the emergence of a field of management dedicated to ensuring productivity of knowledge workers has, over the years, underscored the fact that the optimism of these theorists quickly finds itself crashing up against the hard realities that have always existed under capital, primarily the need to ensure profit above all other considerations. In the midst of eighty hour workweeks, permanent job insecurity for increasing numbers of workers, savage bouts of outsourcing and the large-scale production of demeaning and routinized work such as call centre and data processing jobs, the liberal-democratic perspective has either completely lost contact with reality or, in its more thorough applications, been progressively forced to modify its initial optimism concerning what a combination of capitalist markets and high-technology would bring. During the course of the 1970s, one antagonistic tradition of inquiry, developed in the liberal-democrats’ own back yard, was more than ready to point out its shortcomings.

2.2 Critical Responses to the Knowledge Worker Thesis
As liberal-democratic theories of the knowledge worker became dominant amid the restructuring towards post-Fordism that was initiated in the 1970s, their vast intellectual output, along with the transformations of informational work, workers, and workplaces it commented upon, was subject to a deeply corrosive response from a set of writers who would create counter-analyses of such transformations. This set of perspectives emerges from multiple locations, including renegade voices within academic disciplines such as sociology and the political economy of communication, trade union accounts, and subversive journalistic treatments of the transformation of work. Without denying the extent of the changes occurring in the world of labour, these thinkers have begun their analyses from a very different starting point: the nature of capital’s ongoing command over labour. For capital, these thinkers have suggested, does not react to markets and information technology, elements that cannot but be deeply suspect beginning points in the liberal-democratic account. Rather, it creates them and therefore bears the responsibility for their effects. These theorists have illustrated how the combined effects of information technology and the restructuring of firms on workers are hardly as painless as those rendered in the dominant liberal-democratic discourses. Their research has highlighted the negative effects of flexible employment practices, overwork, deskillng, automation, downsizing, outsourcing, surveillance, de-unionization, and the increasingly blurring boundaries between work and life in “digital capitalism” (Schiller 2000). While their theoretical influences differ, researchers who have addressed the situation of communicative labour share at least one aim - that of counteracting the liberal-democratic narratives that ignore or downplay the continuities of domination within an informatized form of capitalist production. As a result, this dissident perspective embodies the immediate other of the celebratory theories of knowledge work examined above.
These researchers have begun their analyses not with an examination of the reified concepts of “markets” and “information technology”, but from the structure of capital and the degrading results of its organization of labour under post-Fordism. Their intellectual output has, as a result, been united by several themes commonly present in their rebuttals: 1) a tendency to attack the wildest pronunciations of the information economy prophets, stressing the history of knowledge work, the physicality of the contemporary economy, the labour process, and the forms of work that it exploits; 2.) Evidence that within the professions produced by the digital economy capital has enlisted information technology in an assault on workers and their organizations (through automation, surveillance and work transfer) and that, just as in the “old” economy, there is emerging a familiar Taylorist fissure between conception and execution; 3) a much greater attention to the diversity of the sites, typologies, and experiences of knowledge work, with particular focus on the differing experiences, separations, and exclusions by gender, race, and between waged or unwaged sites of communicative labour; 4) the tentative claim that a new knowledge working class, or “cybertariat” is emerging within digital capitalism.

2.2.1 The Material Economy

Since the early 1970s, theorists of the white-collar proletariat have attempted to interrupt the seemingly endless replication of “postindustrial fantasies” (Mosco 1983) generated by liberal-democrat thinkers via a critique of the alleged innocence and weightlessness of the informational economy, the forms of work it organizes, and the commodities it produces. These critical analyses have begun with an exploration of capital (in its newly wired variant) in order to point out the broad and frequently embarrassing gaps existing between liberal-democratic theories and
the realities of life within the capitalist production process. A early exemplar of this tradition, Herbert Schiller (1973), suggested in *The Mind Managers* (written the same year as Bell’s *Postindustrial Society*) that informational capitalism and knowledge work were headed in a much more worrying direction than that described by its emergent caste of high priests. Schiller offered a counter-reading of the “mind management” put into effect by the inter-linked system of the state, the military, the private sector and education institutions through advertising, popular culture, news, public opinion polls and other tools. As an interrelated whole, he suggested, these components formed a “knowledge industry” bent on creating compliant subjects rather than rewarding forms of work.

At issue for Schiller was not whether or not the structure of the American economy was changing, or whether there was an increase in knowledge worker positions (he cites Machlup’s work to support his case for a changing form of capitalist production, Ibid, 63), but that this fact in itself meant little if one did not also realize that “much of the expertise to exploit [the knowledge] market is firmly in the hands of private industry and the military establishment” (Ibid). For Schiller and others in the political economy of communication, the project of responding to the work of Bell and others began as one of offering a wake-up call regarding the new and deeply authoritarian institutional arrangements within capital and the state that discourses of the end of ideology, post-industrialism, and knowledge work only helped to obfuscate (Schiller 1969, 1973, Murdock and Golding 1974, 1977a, 1977b, Mosco 1983, Robins and Webster 1983).

While few of the researchers critiquing liberal-democratic perspectives would question the occurrence of some rather deep-seated structural change within capitalism, they have persistently
attacked the suggestion that information technologies and new markets for digital goods have brought about a “revolution” towards a “weightless” economy. It is not difficult to see how liberal-democratic dalliance with the vocabulary of insurgency (Esther Dyson et al suggesting that “the central event in the twentieth century is the overthrow of matter” is emblematic, [2004]), has led to vitriolic responses by thinkers like Ursula Huws:

…if we are to avoid constructing a purely abstract universe, constituted entirely of “knowledge”… it is useful to retain an awareness of this underlying materiality. For an economic perspective, I would argue, it is important to retain a more specific awareness of the worker and his or her labor process. (2003, 139)

Responses such as Huws’ have often begun with questions of the extent to which the “knowledge economy,” and “knowledge work” are feasible concepts, as a part of subjecting liberal-democratic ideology to materialist critique (Colby 2007, Henwood 2003, Kapur 2007, Broad and Antony 2006). Another way in which this critique has been advanced has been through an examination of the varied history of knowledge workers and their relationship with capital, research that underscores the fact that knowledge work has always had a role in capitalist production (Downey 2002, Blok and Downey 2003). Some of these thinkers have, as a result, suggested (or heavily implied) that there is “nothing new” about informational capitalism and the jobs it produces, since as Ursula Huws points out, “writers, poets, dramatists, visual artists, scientists, inventors and musicians have been producing ‘intangible products’ for centuries” (2003, 138).

A thorough examination of the world of work, for these authors, begins from an examination of capitalist commodification of human activity. For Huws, rather than moving toward a “weightless economy,” capitalism works incessantly (in any era) to create material products out
of the commodification of services (Ibid, 131). With the massive contemporary production of material commodities, globally humans are extracting more raw materials than they ever have, a fact that flies in the face of pastoral images of an informational economy. In this vein, independent economist Doug Henwood makes short work of inflated claims of a “knowledge” economy, underscoring for example the continuing statistical relevance of allegedly vanished industries such as manufacturing to the American economy in terms of GDP and employment (2003).

### 2.2.2 The Degradation of Knowledge Work

A central contribution this intellectual tradition has made is the attention it has paid to the degradation of knowledge work due to the application of scientific management and information technology to its organization within the firm. The hegemonic figure here, a Daniel Bell of the malcontents, is Harry Braverman, whose *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1999), as suggested in the introduction, made a lasting contribution to those seeking to puncture the early claims of liberal-democratic theories. In his classic text the American sociologist made the case that the new army of intellectual custodians required by what he understood, after Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy’s work (1966), as the “monopoly” form of capital, were being, like their industrial progenitors, steadily robbed of the ability to unite conception and execution in their work. For Braverman, “mental labour” or “labour done primarily in the brain” (Ibid, 79), which “takes on the form of an external product – symbols in linguistic, numeric, or other representational forms” (Ibid, 218), was becoming part of a painfully familiar process of capitalist disassembly and reorganization. Thus the traditional craft knowledge of clerks was extracted from them and used by management
to create a monopoly over knowledge and “control each step of the labour process and its mode of execution (Ibid, 82).”

Braverman, who served a four-year apprenticeship as a coppersmith and worked as a pipe-fitter and sheet metal worker, was offering an immanent critique of liberal-democratic theories of knowledge work, ridiculing Bell in the process for his lack of familiarity with the world of material labour (Ibid, 73-74) and attacking Drucker’s denunciations of Taylorism as insincere (Ibid, 27). For Braverman the capitalist reorganization of knowledge work was not only a matter of making companies more productive. The one “pivot upon which all of modern management turns” was “the control over work through the control over the decisions that are made in the course of work” (Ibid, emphasis in original). The reorganization of work that was underway in corporate America was, therefore, about maintaining and extending capital’s command over mental labour just in the same way that it had lusted for control over the physical work process.

If the division of labour, its reorganization, and its ultimate degradation had the predictability of a natural process under capitalism, then for knowledge workers the writing was on the wall:

the working class is subjected to the capitalist mode of production, and to the successive forms which it takes, only as the capitalist mode of production conquers and destroys all other forms of the organization of labour, and with them, all alternatives for the working population (Ibid, 103).

With the global political-economic restructuring well underway by the end of the seventies and into the eighties, a number of theorists from sociology and communication studies extended Braverman’s antagonistic line of inquiry (Caroit 1979, Glasgow Media Group 1976, Mattelart & Siegelaub 1979, 1983, Mosco & Wasko 1983). Here analysis of the media’s role as an
ideological tool in neo-liberal restructuring was combined with a sober look at the steady upheaval and increasing micro-management the lives of knowledge workers were subject to in professions ranging from journalism to telecommunications work. These inquiries into the transformations of capital have conjured up at best sobering and at worst harrowingly dystopian scenarios of the present against the promised land offered by Drucker and associates. Rather than being allowed to follow their inner penchant for autonomy and self-organization, “those who work with information in large organizations,” concluded Andrew Clement in his analysis of office workers, “are in the process of being subjected to greater managerial control through their use of information systems” (1988, 218). These analyses of digital work have often tended to focus on the introduction of information technology into the workplace and, as Clement suggested, “the opportunities and constraints for the exercise of managerial control” (Ibid) that resulted from this. Knowledge workers were far from self-organizing, these thinkers have consistently replied – instead they are frequently becoming, as Marx had suggested was the case for the factory worker of industrial capitalism, appendages of machines (this time digital) controlled at a distance by Daniel Bell’s technocratic elite.

The critique of the organizational violence committed against the labour process of information workers by management in the extension of its quest for command continued unabated through the New Economy storm of 1990s. Heather Menzies, in her studies of the restructuring of offices, hospitals, retail services and the insurance industry described a new political fault line between owners and workers as a “digital divide” between “those who work with computers and control them” and those “who work for computers and are controlled by them” (1996, 10-11). For Ursula Huws, drawing on research conducted on data-entry clerks, call centre workers, and clerical workers, this division amounts to a split between “creative,” or “originating” labour, and
“process work”, the routine labour of “deskilled workers who are essentially following instructions” (2003, 140-141).

Less academic denunciations of workplace restructuring and managerial infamy have been equally determined in their exposure of the dark side of capitalist restructuring. Doug Henwood (2003, 37) suggests, in his extensive analysis of the statistical data from the New Economy period, that “technology may be making some jobs more interesting, but it’s de-skilling lots of others – and it’s increasing employers’ powers of measurement and surveillance over workers.” Simon Head (2004) has produced exceptional case studies analyzing the application of Taylorist methods to the reorganization the knowledge work. For Head, the carceral organization of call centre work and the “managed care” transformation of the labour of physicians are eloquent examples of a process that leads us all the way back to William Henry Leffingwell’s dream of turning every clerk’s life into a miserable series of gestures devoid of meaning. Information technology’s prodigious powers of measurement, monitoring, and control have played a vital role in assisting the ongoing attempts to submit brainwork to the separation between conception and execution, and while today’s workflow architects prefer the term “reengineering” to “scientific management,” the project, Head and these critics argue, is one and the same.

2.2.3 Differences Within Knowledge Work

The destroyers of liberal-democratic idols have also paid a much greater attention to the diversity of the sites, typologies, and experiences of knowledge work. First of all, they have regularly pointed out that knowledge-based labour is perched atop a global, and strongly raced,
hierarchy of work (Park and Pellow 2004, Smith, Sonnenfeld and Pellow 2006). Put more simply, for every white video-game coder in Burnaby, British Columbia who may be called a “knowledge worker” there are scores of labourers from the Philippines or Malaysia who perform the deeply physical and overwhelmingly toxic work of assembling PC boards. Secondly, these theorists have been increasingly punctilious in their illumination of the divisions that are internal to knowledge work (Burris 1998). The labour of the call-centre worker and the software engineer may both require knowledge and communication, but they are organized very differently and reflect a growing bifurcation of labour.

At the pinnacle of waged brainwork, or the desirable end of what he calls the “knowledge labour divide” (2004, 34), Andrew Ross has carried out in-depth ethnographic research into what for a brief time verged on becoming the realization of Peter Drucker’s distant call for the flattening of organizational hierarchies and the importation of the worker’s “soul” into the workplace. In his examination of what he calls “no collar” workers at two New York Internet companies at the heart of the New Economy craze during the late 1990s, Ross suggests that for these workers labour was part and parcel of a spatial and cognitive “industrialization of bohemia”, in which an ethic of work as “play” and narratives of non-conformity with respect to the “corporate world” helped to mask chronic overwork and the anxiety generated by the increasing threat of being laid off as the New Economy began to implode. The insidious fact of this kind of knowledge work, for Ross, is precisely that it incorporates Drucker’s dream, enlisting

I use the term global “hierarchy”, rather than “division”, of labour, because such labour is often and increasingly not divided by region of the world. Filipina women may work in the toxic “clean rooms” assembling microchips at National Semiconductor Corporation facilities in Santa Clara, California just as they do in National Semiconductor Corporation’s facilities in the Philippines.
“employees’ freest thoughts and impulses in the service of salaried time” (Ibid, 19). As Ross points out, “the traditional situation of the artist as unattached and adaptable to circumstance is surely now coming into its own as the ideal definition of the flexible knowledge worker” (Ibid, 144). In her case study of the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers, (or WashTech) Michele Rodino-Colocino (2007) arrives at similar conclusions regarding the exploitative nature of much high-end knowledge work, pointing to studies documenting the rampant overwork and chronic insecurity characterizing otherwise “creative” labour in the high-tech industry.

On the other side of the bifurcated knowledge work divide, thinkers aiming to puncture liberal-democratic fantasies have examined the toil of workers at the bottom of what C. Wright Mills described as the “pyramid within a pyramid” of knowledge work. Here the population includes the “data slaves” performing call centre work and data entry in American prisons (Costanza-Chock 2003), their only slightly better-paid colleagues in Caribbean “digiports” (Wilson 1998), and those lining up for a day of outsourced call centre work in Columbia after having been laid off the day before (Weiss 2007). In a poignant illustration of the deep divisions existing between knowledge workers globally, tens of thousands of Chinese sweatshop workers “play” video games for money so they can accumulate experience points, special weapons or abilities for virtual characters owned by (Western) gamers who pay for this character development in online worlds such as World of Warcraft (Barboza 2005). The explosion of knowledge work, these thinkers have pointed out, has not eliminated the sweatshop, but only brought about its digital variant.

Critical refutations of liberal-democratic theories have also offered careful examinations of how knowledge work is strongly divided by gender – the closer one reaches the bottom of the scale of
remuneration, prestige, and safety, the more likely one is to find a higher percentage of women in the profession (Belt, Richardson and Webster 2000, Martin 2002). If our bearings are increasingly difficult to find within post-Fordism, these authors have suggested that sad yet familiar gender relations are coming to the fore: it is women that have borne the brunt of workplace restructuring. Not only are they the face of the new permanent part-time workforce, with few, if any benefits, but women are also subject to the increasing intrusion of work into private life through home-based work (Menzies 1996, 34). All of these qualities make it important, for numerous writers within this tradition, to situate analyses of the exploitative nature of knowledge work in the material and embodied experiences of women (Balka 2002, Scott-Dixon 2004), work that has included Barbara Freeman’s (2000) compelling study of Barbadian women’s identity in the contradictory negotiation of their “pink collar” outsourced information work.

A number of these writers have also drawn attention to the overflowing of value-extraction (and thus social control) from the walls of the knowledge workplace. Alain Touraine (whose refashioning of Marxist theory for a digital age was among those excoriated by Daniel Bell) offered an early observation along the lines of Machlup’s musing on the economic value of knowledge when he suggested not only that economic growth depended “much more directly than ever before” on knowledge, but that “all the domains of social life - education, consumption, information, etc – are being more and more integrated into what used to be called production factors” (1971, 5). Braverman suggests that Drucker’s calls for the colonization of the knowledge worker’s soul means that “the internal planning of such corporations becomes in effect social planning,” and points out how even outside the corporate walls “in time not only the material and service needs but even the emotional patterns of life are channeled through the
market” (1999, 186). This fact leads him to push beyond Marx, discussing the declining utility of differentiating between productive and unproductive labour (Ibid, 284-293), a distinction also challenged by the foundational work of Dallas Smythe (1977) on the labour performed by the “audience commodity.” For Smythe, the product of the capitalist media is not merely ideology, but rather “audiences and readerships” whose attention is sold to advertisers. No longer is labour confined to the remunerated time that workers spend in cubicles, but the new labouring subjects “a) perform essential marketing functions for the producers of consumers’ goods, and b) work at the production and reproduction of labour power” (Ibid, 3) when they watch television in their living rooms, read advertisements on subways, and register product placements in films viewed at the theatre. These theorists have shown how, with the advent of the information society, labour has spread throughout the social field.

2.2.4 The Cybertariat

Such visions, if much more accurate than those of the liberal-democratic theorists of the knowledge worker, have tended to be bleak. Yet if knowledge workers were being organized so mercilessly by capital, would they ever fight back and organize themselves? While Daniel Bell and others believed class struggle was on a downward curve in the information society, critics of the liberal-democratic tradition have occasionally gestured towards the struggles to come. Braverman, as we saw in the introduction, offered a warning to self-styled Druckerite managers of the dormant potential for antagonism in mental workers. And if C. Wright Mills, in his deeply pessimistic early thinking on white collar workers, suggested these workers were “a dominant tendency but not a leading edge, an emerging class but not a nascent vanguard” (Weeks 2007, 53
238), the mechanization of the workplace and the continual deskilling of knowledge work would lead, according to political economists of communication, to the development of new struggles, this time over the control of information (Mattelart 1979, Mosco 1983).

Schiller’s *Mind Managers* began with the ideological manipulation of various groups who would be joining the growing ranks of knowledge workers required by the expanding informational apparatus. Although the system for the manipulation of consciousness through mass media was undeniably entrenched, for Schiller there was also a contradiction at its core: as knowledge work skills and resources spread, so too did new abilities to question the system. These new intellectual workers were the true question mark of post-Fordism. Writing from a Californian university in the midst of unprecedented countercultural upheaval, Schiller warned, “the ‘manageability’ of the knowledge worker/trainee,” referring with vitriol to Drucker’s futurology, “is already the crisis of the present” (1973, 151). Braverman concurred, warning that the ongoing and shameless reduction of work to drudgery would result in the “creation of a large proletariat in a new form” (1999, 245). Thirty years later, Ursula Huws makes a similar point, raising the problem of consciousness: “It is apparent that a new cybertariat is in the making. Whether it will perceive itself as such is another matter (2003, 176).

Other writers who have been critical of liberal-democratic theorists have worked on adapting Marxist analysis in order to comprehend the labouring subject that was appearing everywhere around them. For Alain Touraine the “programmed society” brought in its wake new forms of conflict based around the central role of knowledge and the expansion of production. In this scenario, rather than a simple conflict between a small caste of digital capitalists and a constantly expanding cybertariat, the new war was “between the structures of economic and political
decision-making and those who are reduced to dependent participation” (1971, 9). With work increasingly becoming “a role within a system of communications and social relations” (Ibid, 64) it was no longer useful to think of the working class as an “occupational category” bound by a specified relationship to the means of production. Rather, it was a more generalized “force of social struggle” (Ibid, 17) submitted to the domination of those who disposed of greater knowledge and could control more information.

For some in this tradition these new struggles, however, beyond being gestured at, actually demanded a focus on “direct producers” of information, the struggles they generated, and their union organizations (Mosco 1983, xviii). Yet, perhaps because the overwhelming amount of attention disciplines such as sociology and communications studies have paid the “production and reproduction of invariant structures” and the concentration of ownership and power these embody (Mosco 1996, 29, Webster 1995, 75), the tradition has been predominantly silent when it comes to an analysis of the moments of struggle and the modes by which knowledge workers are organizing themselves.

There are notable exceptions to this trend. The first volume of the Critical Communications Review, “Labour, the Working Class, and the Media” (Mosco and Wasko 1983) offered historical studies of knowledge worker unions (Neilson 1983, Wasko 1983), strategies for information workers (Robins and Webster 1983), and reflections on the creation of a new workers’ culture amid the webs of “microelectronic networks” (Goldhaber 1983). Mattelart and Siegelaub’s two-volume edited collection on Communication and Class Struggle (1979, 1983) began by claiming that “to understand this movement of reality, we need to listen to a group of printing workers struggling against industrial concentration and its model of a computerized press”, an act that was
“just as important for the progress and elaboration of a science of communication as the work
developed by a university researcher” (Mattelart 1979, 24). In its pages are, (albeit
overshadowed by studies engaging with the need to create alternate forms of communication, or
what today we call independent media), reports of knowledge workers’ struggles from across the
world as neoliberalism established itself and the Soviet Union began to crumble. In Scotland the
Glasgow University Media Group examined the relationship between white-collar unions and the
media (1976, 205-243), although this remained part of an effort to conceptualize the production
of regularly ideological anti-union content in the media. More recently, there have been
examinations of struggles within call centres (Bain and Taylor 2000), the French cultural sector
(Bodnar 2006), around the global electronics industry (Park and Pellow 2004, Smith, Sonnenfeld
and Pellow 2006), and convergent trade unionism in the media and telecommunications sector
(Mosco and McKercher 2006, Shniad 2005 and 2007) to remind us of the ongoing existence of
exploitation and resistance in knowledge work and its associated industries.

Critical theories of the degradation of knowledge work, beginning as they have with a critique
of capital as opposed to an exaltation of markets and information technology, have offered a
powerful counterpoint to liberal-democratic visions of weightless production, empowered
brainworkers, and the elimination of the working class. Launching their inquiries into the
realities of capitalist restructuring, they have demonstrated the ultimate unfeasibility of such
visions, outlining the gap between these celebrations of knowledge work and the exploitation
existing across virtually the gamut of knowledge worker positions. Yet despite a recent
resurgence of interest in labour organizing from these theorists, they have more often than not
focused on the organization of knowledge workers by capital rather than those moments in which
they are organizing themselves. If we agree that the latter project has value, then their work stands to be complemented by that of a group of theorists and militants from Italy.

2.3 Autonomist Theories of Immaterial Labour

As the transition toward post-Fordism proceeded in North America, a third set of theorists began to devote their efforts to the analysis of, and engagement with, the organization of knowledge work. Emerging predominantly from Italy, but increasingly composed of an international network of activists and scholars, autonomist Marxist critiques have since the end of the 1990s become a widely circulated and debated position across the humanities and social sciences in Western academia. As with both of the perspectives on knowledge work discussed above, this tradition was and is a part of the struggles it narrates, developing a political analysis that emerged out of Italy’s compressed passage from a largely agricultural form of capitalism to a post-Fordist, informational society in under fifty years. Autonomist theorists have read these changes from within, inventing a compelling political vocabulary and an evolving set of organizational practices in the process.

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13 Since the history and central themes of the broader autonomist approach have been the subject of a number of thorough treatments (Cleaver 2000, Ryan 1982, Dyer-Witheford 1999, and Wright 2002), and that I will take up some facets of the epistemological and methodological approaches characterizing the perspective in the next chapter, I will not offer a prolonged explanation of the tradition here. I have maintained Harry Cleaver’s use of the term ‘autonomist’ to refer to the tradition, but will sometimes also refer to the writers directly involved in fashioning the concept of immaterial labour as being a part of “post-operaismo,” or as “post-workerist,” a term which includes the more literal translation of the name, ‘operaismo’, by which this political and (Footnote continues on following page)
Autonomist marxism has historically been oriented toward the creation of new forms of collective organization, direct action, and anti-capitalist forms of life, a project grounded in inquiry into the ever changing “composition” of labour (Dyer-Witheford 1999, Wright 2002).\[^{14}\] Foregrounding the ongoing struggle between labour and capital within historical transformation, autonomists have set out from the assumption that while it is continually decomposed by capital’s attacks, labour emerges recomposed in a form that poses new, and potentially escalated, threats to capital’s rule. Thus, for autonomists, the de-skilled industrial “mass worker” of the Taylorist factory, for example, was a figure that, due to its militancy, had to be decomposed by capital; this decomposition in turn set the stage for the restructuring of capital according to a post-Fordist model (Negri 1988). The organization of work, and thus the expression, forms, and prospects of collective organization by workers, are constituted within a dynamic, ongoing, mutual recomposition of labour and capital, a process autonomist historians have traced back centuries through the formation of an industrial proletariat, pirate enclaves, colonial sugar plantations, witch hunts, revolts against the enclosures, and beyond (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, Federici 2004).

Since the late 1980s autonomist theorists have begun to coalesce around the position that “immaterial labour,” as they call it, is a vital part of labour’s emergent composition under post-

\[^{14}\] This tradition has passed through a number of phases. Perhaps the most important break is between the autonomist thought up until the severe repression of the movements it emerged out of at the end of the seventies (operaismo) and that of the eighties and beyond (often referred to as post-operaismo), when a significant portion of autonomist theory became influenced by French poststructuralism and the political-economic theories of the Regulation school, focusing increasingly on the role of language and communication in productive processes, historical difference over continuity, post-Fordism and networks, Empire and the multitude.
Fordism. The concept of immaterial labour emerges from a combination of feminist-autonomist theories of unwaged domestic labour (Dalla Costa 2008, Dalla Costa and James 1972, Fortunati 1995, 2007), and Mario Tronti (2006) and Antonio Negri’s (1988, 2005) discussions of the emergence of the “social factory” and the “social worker” respectively, in the late 1960s and 1970s. These theories percolated throughout the 1980s, benefiting from encounters with French poststructuralist theories of subjectivity and the Regulation School’s theories of post-Fordism (both side-effects of the flight of some of autonomia’s key theorists to France in order to avoid arrest) during the affirmation of neoliberalism in Europe.¹⁵ The kind of work they saw emerging in the bleak landscape of the 1980s was, they believed, the realization of the tendency described by Marx in his notebooks for Capital, the Grundrisse, when capitalist society’s production and reproduction of itself would no longer depend primarily on the unruliness of physical labour, but on what he calls the “general productive forces of the social brain” (1993, 694), or, more succinctly, the “general intellect.”

With the arrival of the 1990s, as the creative consultants, freelance web designers and flextimers were being lionized by New Economy cheerleaders, a group of autonomists (often categorized as “post-operaisti”) began to theorize the activities uniting these and other emergent

¹⁵ Dyer-Witheford (1999, 221-238) has offered one of the only coherent accounts in English of the development of the theories that would form the central tenets of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire (2000) a decade later within the pages of the journal Futur Anterièur, a journal which brought together intellectuals such as Paolo Virno, Maurizio Lazzarato, Negri and Hardt. My own account, while drawing on some of the initial formulations of theories of immaterial labour developed in that journal, picks up the story somewhat later, with their less tentative formulations of the mid nineties. A project of intellectual history which is begging to be carried out is an account of the personal, intellectual, and social histories of the development of post-operaismo, especially as it straddled Italy and France, jail and the outside world, and journals such as Futur Anterièur and Multitudes in France, but also Luogo Comune, Metropoli, and DeriveApprodi in Italy.
professions as forms of “immaterial labour” (Lazzarato 1996, 1997, Negri and Lazzarato 1997, Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004, Berardi 1998, 2001, Virno 1996a, 1996b, 2001, 2004). These thinkers, while differing from each other in some respects,\(^\text{16}\) are nonetheless united by a core set of theses regarding post-Fordist work, and have reworked each others’ concepts to such an extent that it is fair to say their work is more of a self-consciously collective project than either of the perspectives examined thus far.

Autonomist inquiry has traditionally begun not with markets and technology (as the knowledge worker theorists have done), or with capital’s command (as the theorists of the degradation of labour have), but with an analysis of living labour, its composition, and its forms of resistance. We will delve into the reasons why this is the case in somewhat more depth further on (in Chapter 3), but as a result of this point of departure, the autonomists’ analyses of immaterial labour have generally reached the following conclusions: 1) knowledge, language, communication and even emotion have been “put to work” with unprecedented intensity globally, though most widely in advanced post-Fordist sectors and regions; 2) it is increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to discern the difference between work time and free time, as work is less confined to the “workplace” and increasingly performed across the social field, the new expansive location for the reaping of surplus value; 3) the transformations that have led to the proliferation of immaterial labour have antagonistic roots, meaning they are not the result of benign progress (as in the liberal-democratic version), but rather of the progression of frequently violent, cyclical struggles.

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\(^{16}\) For example, a key theorist of the perspective, and one that will feature heavily in the dissertation, Paolo Virno, does not use the term “immaterial labour.” This does not exclude his work from this tradition however, first of all because his discussion of the forms of work characterizing digital capitalism bears a number of similarities to that of other autonomists, and secondly because their own discussions are so closely informed by his texts.
between capital and labour, something which autonomists suggest indicates that immaterial labour itself is full of subversive potential. Let us examine each of these contentions more closely, paying attention throughout to their discussion of immaterial labour’s organization.

2.3.1 Language and Labour

Since the late 1980s, and with increasing regularity from the mid-1990s, many autonomist theorists have proposed that immaterial labour is a key manifestation of the emerging makeup of labour under post-Fordism, an argument that reached its widest audience through Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s companion books, *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004). While the roots of this concept are to be found in autonomist feminism (a critique I discuss below) and the workerist debates of the sixties and seventies (a portion of which we will be discussing in the next chapter), for the purposes of this chapter I begin with early discussions of immaterial labour as referring to a broad set of activities which comprise but at the same time go beyond unremunerated housework or waged factory labour, and, over the course of examining the development of these theories, bring in some of the aforementioned currents of thought.

17 Given the complexity of the tradition, and the fact that language inevitably does violence to its objects, my account erases some of the finer points of the analyses offered by single theorists of immaterial labour. Nick Dyer-Witheford (2005), for example, has offered a detailed genealogy of the evolution of this figure within the thought of autonomist Marxism’s best-known theorist, Antonio Negri. Negri’s conception is different from that of Virno (although we will be exploring this difference a little more closely in the conclusion), and so forth. It is my hope that situating this tradition as a collective project of analysis and intervention is, for the purposes of this dissertation at least, necessary. Individual genealogies, of which more are needed for individual autonomists, act as a useful counterbalance for this act of violence.
The roots of the term “immaterial labour,” however, go at least as far back as the political economy of Karl Marx, in particular to his discussion of productive and unproductive labour under capitalism. In his formulation, while “productive labour” produces material commodities (e.g. factory workers producing cars), “unproductive labour” can be of two types. The first form of unproductive labour (i.e. the labour of artists, writers, composers, etc) results in material goods (books, score sheets, paintings, etc). The second form of unproductive labour results in a product that is inseparable from the act of production, such as that of the pianist, the bartender, or the shopkeeper. The latter subset of labour, Marx suggested in Capital however, were “peripheral phenomena” that could be “ignored when considering capitalist production as a whole” (1990, 1048).

The contention held in common by autonomist theorists is that while Marx was able to write off these forms of labour that did not produce “material” commodities as marginal in an era of industrialized production (although the labour of his wife Jenny might have given him a clue that

18 Sean Sayers (2007) has recently criticized this “productivist” reading of Marx at the heart of theories of immaterial labour, suggesting that it does not do justice to the German political economist’s concept of labour, the roots of which Sayers traces back to Marx’s relationship with/debt to Hegel. There are certainly problems with the concept of immaterial labour, ones I discuss in the conclusion to this chapter, and Sayers is right to bring them up. Nonetheless, his piece, in its eagerness to establish a “correct” reading of Marx, not only obscures the fact that Marx’s work changed a great deal during the course of his lifetime (during which time, it important to point out, he rebelled against Hegel’s ontology), but also presumes there is inherent value in discerning what Marx actually thought, an exegetical activity autonomists have been far less interested in. In addition, by suggesting autonomists do not believe immaterial labour has material effects Sayers seriously mischaracterizes their position, one he might be more aware of if he had dealt with the complex literature on immaterial labour that is internal to the autonomist tradition. This literature also includes sustained feminist-autonomist consideration of the relationship between production and reproduction in Marxist theory and how this relates to domestic and caring labour in particular, which Sayers does not mention. Finally, and most seriously considering Sayers’ anxiety to establish the “facts” within Marx’s work, the piece (Footnote continues on following page)
it was more widespread than he suggested), with the advent of post-Fordism these forms of work have decisively moved from the periphery toward the centre of capitalist accumulation. In an economy based increasingly on the production and the reproduction of the general intellect, labour becomes less about the production of material commodities, and more about the production of immaterial goods.

If Dallas Smythe lamented the fact that communication was a “blindspot” for Western marxism at the end of the 1970s, a decade later the post-operaisti were in the midst of a rigorous collective effort to theorize the relationship between communication and productive processes under post-Fordist capitalism. Economist Christian Marazzi (1999, 16) summarized their conclusion when he suggested that “communication and production” had become “one and the same,” even in iconic Fordist sectors such as automobile manufacturing. Echoing Machlup’s reflections on the inadequacy of economics of over thirty years previous, for Marazzi the emergence of digital capitalism and the newly wired assembly line at companies such as Toyota required a conceptual turn to linguistics. In other words, in order to understand the composition of labour within a workplace that was dominated by information technology, critical analyses needed to consider the types of language and communication that were becoming predominant within it. According to Marazzi, within the post-Fordist labour process an agile and adaptable form of language was gaining ascendancy, one that “produces organization” and is capable of responding to the continual feedback loops being built into everything from Peugeot assembly lines to fast food service sector work. As a result, for Marazzi the “ideal” post-Fordist worker is the one that “has a high degree of adaptability to the changes of rhythm or tasks, a ‘poly-operative’ kind of labour ignores the factual basis of the autonomists’ discussion of immaterial labour, that is, the above-
power that knows how to ‘read’ the flux of information, that knows how to ‘labour communicating’” (Ibid, 17).^{19}

Beyond the informatization of traditionally Fordist jobs, autonomists most commonly employ the term immaterial labour to denote a range of professions that have exploded since the advent of post-Fordism, ranging from high-tech work, service employment, through caring/affective labour, to sex-work. Maurizio Lazzarato’s definition of immaterial labour, which he suggests “produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity” (1996, 133), spans both older, now-informatized professions, and emergent ones. For Lazzarato the “informational content” of immaterial labour is related to the presence of information technology in the process of the commodity’s production (pointing to the extent to which all professions, from farm to factory work have been subjected to computerization), while the “cultural content” refers to the type of work predominantly in emergent kinds of digital labour, which involve “a series of activities that are not normally recognized as ‘work’: activities of defining and fixing cultural standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion” (Ibid.).

The most crucial point of difference between material and immaterial labour, for Lazzarato and other autonomists, is that the commodity produced as a result of the latter is different from those Marx chose to focus on in *Capital*. The immaterial commodity “is not destroyed in the act of consumption, but… enlarges, transforms, and creates the ideological and cultural environment of the consumer. It does not reproduce the physical capacity of labour power, but transforms its user

discussed passages from *Capital*. 
In the pages of *Empire*, Hardt and Negri (2000, 290) also define immaterial labour according to its product, suggesting that it “produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication.”

Yet how, as the Spanish feminist group Precarias a la Deriva (2004) have asked, are we to consider everything from flight attendants to data entry workers under one label? Since its earliest elaborations, discussions of immaterial labour have, like those of the more observant liberal-democratic thinkers and their critical antagonists, progressively qualified the employment category by confronting the differences within it.

For Hardt and Negri (Hardt 1999, Negri 1999a), a third component of immaterial labour is “affective labour”, or work that includes the emotional and caring labour of nurses, sex workers, and domestics. Among the different forms immaterial labour can take (including knowledge work, and “free labour” which we will explore below), affective forms of labour are most obviously productive of “a social relationship (a relationship of innovation, of production, of consumption)” and “only in the presence of this reproduction does its activity have economic value” (Lazzarato 1997, 42). In their definitions of this more specific subset of immaterial labour, autonomists have drawn on thinkers such as the seventeenth century philosopher Spinoza and French poststructuralist Gilles Deleuze, recuperating (as we shall see in the next chapter) the notion of “affect” as that which is produced when bodies come into composition.

19 The translation of this passage, as with those of all Italian editions of works referenced, is my own.
Autonomist feminists have been quick to point out that the growth of service, emotional, and caring work which produces and reproduces social relationships represents a feminization of labour in general (Fortunati 2007, Weeks 2007), as it draws on qualities that have long been incubated within “women’s work” under Fordist capitalism. The analysis of such emotional labour, they have suggested, draws on arguments that feminist theorists of labour have been making for decades (Hochschild 2004), in particular the challenges socialist feminists posed to the division between productive and unproductive labour in the 1970s (see Weeks 2007).

If this “unproductive” labour has become an increasingly dominant mode by which subjects experience work in developed countries, theorists like Paolo Virno (1996b), point out how this work frequently involves a performative aspect (“Welcome to Wal-mart!”) that was once excluded from the Fordist assembly line. For Virno labour has not only become more communicative, but it is increasingly steeped in a kind of virtuosity (Ibid). Within this configuration, some autonomists have suggested the cultural industries that so disturbed Frankfurt School Marxists Adorno and Horkheimer can be seen as offering an early model for contemporary capitalist production as a whole. The type of labour they pioneered, and the degree of communication inherent in it, is now one that pervades most industries (Virno 2004, Formenti 2002, 148).

The concept of immaterial labour, therefore, draws attention to the increasing centrality of knowledge, information, culture, and social relations in general to capital accumulation (Virno, 2001, 181). But how is this communicative labour organized? While a great deal of contemporary immaterial labour work involves the “manipulation of symbols and information” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 292), autonomists, much like the liberal democratic theorists of the
knowledge worker, generally resist the idea that immaterial labour is characterized by the same type of split “between conception and execution, between labour and creativity, between author and audience” as on the Taylorist assembly line, suggesting instead that this division “is simultaneously transcended within the ‘labour process’ and reimposed as political command within the ‘process of valorization’” (Lazzarato 1996, 134). Put more simply, as Hardt and Negri suggest in Empire, “the cooperative aspect of immaterial labour is not imposed or organized from the outside” (2000, 294).

What do the autonomists mean here? Two things. First, they are suggesting that as opposed to the labour of the Taylorist assembly line, post-Fordist immaterial labour tends to involve choice within a set of alternatives. This situation is not benign however, as in liberal democratic accounts. What it means is that command has simply retreated from the shop floor to the level of the system (Dyer-Witheford 1999, 223-225 and 298 footnote 22). It is no less sinister than it was before, although it has become a great deal subtler. For autonomists, Drucker’s appeal in The Practice of Management to involve the soul of the worker in the company has therefore gained ascendancy as a way of organizing work in general and immaterial labour in particular:

It is the worker’s personality, her subjectivity that must be organized and commanded… This transformation of the worker’s labour into labour of control, of the management of information, of the capacities for decision-making that require the investment of subjectivity, touches workers in different ways, depending on their function in the hierarchy of the factory, but presents itself as an irreversible process (Lazzarato and Negri 1997, 23).

The second, even more contentious suggestion these theorists make, is that if immaterial labour produces “social networks, forms of community, biopower” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 293) the result of the advent of such work (in an uncanny reiteration of Daniel Bell’s notion of “games
between people”) “production has been enriched to the level of the complexity of human interaction” (Ibid). Command over the labour process, and thus the organization of immaterial labour, flows beyond the workplace, extending outwards to the “structure and management of networks” (Ibid, 297) in general. If capitalist production has colonized human interaction, for Marazzi, the new phase of capitalism could be described as the disarticulation and the destruction of the community and its rearticulation and reconstruction according to the needs of the corporation (cited in Lazzarato 1997, 12). An immediate result of this, according to Virno, is that “continuous change in the organization of labour has subsumed the complex of inclinations, dispositions, emotions, vices and virtues that mature precisely in socialization outside of the workplace” (1996a, 15).

### 2.3.2 Immaterial and Free Labour

These claims bring us to perhaps the most important and contentious insight regarding immaterial labour offered by the autonomists, their linkage of the increasing economic significance of intellectual, informational, and semiotic production to labour’s exploitation beyond the walls of the traditional workplace. If knowledge, information, culture, and social relations are the “raw materials” for the contemporary productive process (Virno 2001, 181), they have also been “put to work” in society at large.
As communication becomes central to capital’s production of profit, the latter process becomes increasingly diffuse. Immaterial labour, therefore, not only refers to the labour of the call centre worker as she manages affect via a headset during poorly paid work time at a cubicle; it also speaks of the unremunerated work the person on the other end of the line performs when responding to, say, a consumer research survey during dinner. Within the activity of immaterial labour power, therefore, “it becomes evermore difficult to distinguish work time from production time or free time” (Lazzarato and Negri 1997, 2). If work has extended across the time of life, then capitalist control over labour cannot only be considered in terms of how it affects those times in our lives when we are “working.” For autonomists the “labour process” is therefore no longer limited to waged time.

We can see how the autonomist notion of immaterial labour owes a great debt to the aforementioned radical feminist debates on the unwaged labour of housework. For just as Fordist capital depended on the unremunerated domestic labour of women to extract surplus value from men in the factory, digital capitalism increasingly requires what Tiziana Terranova (2004) calls the “free labour” of users. Examples here range from the labour extracted from us as we do our own banking online to the incorporation of users’ modifications of video game designs into new versions offered for sale, from the algorhythmic exploitation of user search histories by search engines to the affect-driven online social networks which appropriate the very stuff of social relations between people (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2008, Cotè and Pybus 2007). As Lazzarato suggests, through this unremunerated immaterial labour we are increasingly expected to become active subjects in the coordination of production, meaning that our experience of work is more than “being subjected to it as simple command (1996 135).” This formulation has seen autonomists engage with Foucault’s notion of biopower (1990), a form of power operating at the
level of the production and reproduction of life itself. The notion of free labour also invites compelling comparisons with Dallas Smythe’s formulation of the audience commodity.

A second key point of difference between the autonomists and liberal-democratic theories of knowledge work is the former’s insistence that the extraction of value from immaterial labour, much like that occurring at the zenith of Fordism in the automobile factories of Turin or Detroit, is hardly a friction-free matter. In Virno’s words, “the coincidence between labour and linguistic communication does not attenuate, but radicalizes the antinomies of the dominant mode of production (2001, 185). Put more simply, capital may have put even our faculty of speech to work, but call center workers still organize, videogame workers sabotage, and film workers agitate in the streets. Autonomists not only assert that this work is not always all it is cracked up to be, but also remind us that the capacities and desires of immaterial labourers sporadically conflict with, and regularly spin out of, capital’s sphere of control.

The reason for this resistance is to be found in an inalienable trait, or potential, marking immaterial labour:

The cycle of immaterial labour is preconstituted by a social and autonomous labour power, one that is capable of organizing its own labour and its relationships with the company. No “scientific management of work” can predetermine this capacity and this productive social creativity (Negri and Lazzarato 1997, 24)

2.3.3 The Self-Organization of Immaterial Labour

What do Negri and Lazzarato mean here? For them and other autonomists there is an inherently risky quality in capital commanding immaterial labourers to organize themselves. Immaterial
labour did not become the “hegemonic” form of production, as Hardt and Negri refer to it, by chance. Rather, beginning with a focus on labour reveals that the rise of its immaterial variant has deeply antagonistic roots. The most recent transformation towards digital capitalism, which autonomists locate in the 1970s, flows from capital’s need to break up the forms of composition that were developing on the manufacturing shop-floor and elsewhere. Indeed the very onset of post-Fordism is attributable to capital’s need to free itself from a series of social combinations (among workers on the shop floor, among students and workers, among women across the segregated domestic sphere, between movements of resistance against imperialism in colonized countries and movements for peace in colonizing countries) that were rendering Fordism unsustainable as a steady, dependable form of capital accumulation.

The dissolution of the mass worker of the Fordist factory, the intensive application of information technology to production, its mechanization and decentralization, the dismantling of the welfare state, the widespread overhaul of legislation surrounding work, and the search for new sources of surplus value in the cognitive and linguistic domains are paradoxically read as a victory by autonomists. Capital did not engage in a discussion of “humane” workplaces in the 1970s by chance - the foosball tables in recreation rooms of video game company “campuses” across North America are not examples of management’s generosity, but attempts to pacify a workforce that has become more demanding. Yet capital’s effort to attenuate conflict through tactics such as these means it merely imports further ambivalence into its operations. What we are witnessing, then, is the institution of a system in which capital increasingly becomes dependant on yet another kind of labour. The expansion of “knowledge work” (informatized, fragmented, precarious, discontinuous) is thus a direct result of the aforementioned struggles, a type of labour that is meant to supplement declining rates of profitability endured by global
capital during the 1970s. Thus while capital can decompose and alter the kind of subject it is dependant on, it cannot alter the fact that it is dependent. With each new bottle created there comes a new, uncontainable genie, and labour that is based so heavily on linguistic production contains a wholly different set of dangers. This is what Virno alludes to when he suggests “when one does not produce new objects but communicative situations, there begins the reign of politics” (Virno 2001, 183).

What form does resistance take however, or better, how might immaterial labour organize itself against its arrangement in what is, as Mario Tronti suggested, a “social factory” (2006)? The question is not as simple as it may seem. If, as autonomists suggest, immaterial labour does tend towards self-organization in a labour process that spans the sum total of our waking hours, what is there left to do but what we are already doing? Negri and Lazzarato, on this point, as with most autonomist theorists, oscillate between vagueness and silence:

While a hypothesis of recomposition cannot be defined only on the basis of the overturning of the given forms of the organization of labour, this hypothesis must however pose itself on the same level of abstraction and anticipate, on this basis, its evolutions, alternatives, and virtualities (1997, 34).

As we shall see in the next chapter, the autonomist perspective has historically urged us to look for moments of conflict, to explore those instances when labour becomes resistent and unmanageable, to find moments of political recomposition. Immateral labour, which for Lazzarato and Negri “does not need capital and its social order to exist any more, but poses itself as immediately free and constituent” (Ibid, 33), seems, in the least careful moments of the autonomists’ writings, to be almost predestined to achieve self-organization. Indeed when
Lazzarato and Negri suggest that “the social cooperation of social labour in the factory, in tertiary activities, manifests an independence before which the managerial function adapts itself rather than being its source and its organization” (1997, 28), for observers such as Maria Turchetto (2001), they end up sounding as disconnected from reality as Peter Drucker and associates.

2.4 Choosing a Perspective for Inquiry

We have, here then, three contemporary analyses of immaterial labour under post-Fordism. Liberal-democratic theories of the knowledge worker begin with a vision of the transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation in which expanding markets and the exponential growth of information technology is steadily revolutionizing the world of work. As Peter Drucker and others imply, commonly used elements of social analysis such as labour and capital are no longer the movers and the shakers in this process of historical transformation, but rather entities which must adapt to relentless changes in order to prosper in the knowledge society. For capital, adaptation means embracing, nurturing, and enabling the central bearer of such changes, the knowledge worker. The ways in which the knowledge worker is best organized in the pursuit of profit may be a matter of debate for these thinkers, but the necessity of having this figure at the heart of the modern firm is not in question. For organized labour, if the liberal-democratic theorists acknowledge it, the writing is on the wall. Out of place in a world of flows where knowledge is overtaking material commodities as a source of profit, collective organization by workers against capital is anachronistic in this new age, the symptom of a disease (exploitation of labour by capital) which, in Castells’ words, may be a “formidable obstacle” for the knowledge society, but one these thinkers imply will be eradicated. As we have seen, these theorists have
been forced to progressively refine their positions as a result of the fact that labour exploitation has gone nowhere, and indeed labour strife remains an absolutely key component of life under post-Fordism. As a result, their dismissal of actual or potential collective organization by labour against capital rings as an incantation, a warding off of a spectre they would collectively rather not see.

While the liberal-democratic perspective on the information society and knowledge work is ultimately untenable, there are important indications to be drawn from it. Certainly the dissatisfaction of these thinkers with the Fordist system and its associated intellectual fields of inquiry was one of the early signs of the weaknesses of this form of capitalist accumulation. At the very least the presence of these discourses reveals the fact that as far back as the 1950s a faction of capital’s brightest intellectual lights had realized change was necessary in order to continue prospering. In addition, these figures intuited the important, indeed essential, position that work applied to the production of immaterial commodities would come to occupy within the restructuring. Taken most kindly, these writers suggested that our economic system required a different kind of ethical project within the world of labour, one that involved self-organization, free access to knowledge, and a more playful approach to both work and life. This is an impulse that ought not to be dismissed out of hand. Yet if those conducting activist inquiries into the emerging compositions within immaterial labour will find the liberal-democratic tradition cannot be ignored, it is equally the case that it cannot be used as a foundation for such projects. The perspective ignores far too much, and fits far too comfortably with the ideological positions espoused by the architects of the knowledge economy, to be a basis for what we shall refer to in the next chapter as the production of subjugated knowledges.
By the 1970s, when capital began its large-scale restructuring in earnest, the growing chorus of critiques both the workplace restructuring and its cheerleaders provoked from progressive sociologists, communication theorists, and labour unions served to demonstrate just how seamlessly those liberal-democratic discourses could meld with “quality circles”, eighty-hour workweeks, highly toxic technological production, repetitive strain injuries, automation, vulnerable employment, and low union density. Critical theories of the degradation of knowledge work have, since then, taken up the ultimately unsustainable arguments of the liberal-democratic tradition and subjected them to critique. These predominantly marxist thinkers have generally begun by disavowing the liberal-democrats’ starting point, the belief in the catalytic power of capitalist markets and digital information technology. As befits their theoretical lineage, they have pointedly avoided this reified way of cutting into the analysis of digital work, replete as it is with a view of markets and technology as things acting in the world rather than as results of processes and social relationships put into play by capital in its ongoing quest to extract profit from labour. For the critics of liberal-democratic theories of knowledge work it is capital that brings about such transformations in markets and technology, and as a result it is capital’s domination of labour that must become our object of analysis if we are to puncture liberal-democratic fantasies of overwhelmingly happy, creative and well-paid knowledge workers. Information technology, these theorists have suggested, is merely fashioned as a weapon against labour by capital, which uses it to spy on its workers, speed up their labour to the brink of collapse, or relocate it at a whim. Exploitation remains, suggest these critical perspectives, and refusing to concede that knowledge workers are no longer at odds with ownership and management by examining the ways in which the immaterial labour process is becoming the producer of a “cybertariat”, these theorists have continued to evoke the spectre of struggle in the informatic garden of Eden. Knowledge work may be a growing necessity for digital capitalism, these theorists have maintained, but discussion of self-organization, leveling of hierarchy, and
workplace creativity simply do not stand up when the actual organization of immaterial labour under flexible capitalism is examined. As Braverman was at pains to demonstrate, capital aims to apply the very same techniques it used for Fordist labour to digital labourers, be they clerks as Braverman suggested, or call centre workers as Simon Head (2003) has documented. Indeed the effects of capitalism’s post-Fordist assault on labour, these researchers indicate, have been devastating for the very same knowledge workers that are so coddled in the liberal democratic thinkers’ literature. At the same time as they fashioned this powerful critique however, in their attempt to document the sad effects of capital’s restructuring these theorists have occasionally tended to neglect an analysis of the moments of resistance occurring within it, an approach that forces the cybertariat into the position of unwilling understudy to capital in most of their accounts.

Antagonistic theories of the degradation knowledge work have offered a potent alternative as a basis upon which to construct critical inquiries into immaterial labour. Their collective analyses of the restructuring of capital from the industrial to the digital have offered key insights into the effects this has had on transformations within the labour process. In addition, it has, in a move that is absolutely essential for those hoping to carry out inquiries into emerging compositions within immaterial labour, furthered the exploration of the differences within forms of immaterial labour, of how it is severely bifurcated in terms of relative control over the labour process, and of how it is deeply raced and gendered. Perhaps because it has been so engaged in these projects however, critical analyses of the degradation of knowledge work have been less likely to analyze the moments in which it refuses capital’s command, and begins to organize for itself.
Autonomist marxists have also refused the rosy picture of the information society and knowledge workers, but their analysis has differed from that of Braverman and company. The work of Negri, Virno, and others has begun with an analysis of living labour, of its composition and its forms of collective organization, in order to be able to understand how best to counteract, and ultimately terminate, capital’s command over its subjects. For autonomists it was labour that forced capital to restructure towards post-Fordism, for it is resistance that determines the form taken by power. When applied to the global system Hardt and Negri call Empire (2000) and Paolo Virno refers to simply as post-Fordism (2004), this perspective on social struggle means that a focus on immaterial labour, of its modes of organization and action, becomes the preferred way by which we can begin to dismantle post-Fordist labour relations, much as the mass worker dismantled Fordist ones. As Negri and Lazzarato suggest, an “antagonistic constitution” is not to be determined “beginning with what is given in the capitalist relation of production,” but from a “break with it” (1997, 33).

It is for this reason that I adopt, in the research that follows, what is primarily an autonomist approach to the three inquiries into forms of collective organization adopted by immaterial labour. Indeed the very choice to begin an inquiry into immaterial labour by looking at the modes through which it resists, is influenced by autonomist theory. Nonetheless, this position should be qualified, for it is impure. Critical theories of knowledge work are important guides in the inquiries that follow, and autonomist approaches have much to learn from theorists of the degradation of labour in terms of the solidity of their research, their attention to the internal differences marking knowledge workers, and their detailed attention to capital and the labour process (Brophy and de Peuter 2007). My adoption of a loosely autonomist perspective on
immaterial labour occurs, therefore, despite what I believe to be some shortcomings in the recent application of the approach, and is seen as a remedy to some of these.

Indeed some of the term’s key theorists have acknowledged the limits of the autonomist concept of immaterial labour (Hardt and Negri 2000, 30, 2004, 109), and a number of voices internal to the autonomist tradition have raised incisive criticisms of it (Caffentzis 2000, 2005, 2007, Dyer-Witheford 2005, Wright 2005). Despite its focus on conflict, one of the primary worries critics have is that the concept of immaterial labour risks grafting the idealism of the post-industrial managerial literature onto an allegedly radical reading of post-Fordist labour (Dyer-Witheford 2005). Underscoring this concern, Vassilis Tsianos and Dimitris Papadopoulos (2006) have openly asked “Who’s afraid of immaterial workers today?” Tsianos and Papadopoulos caution against the reduction of immaterial labour to a “sociological description” of the features of immaterial production which focuses predominantly on the creative, communicative dimensions of such work. Instead, they argue attention ought to be refocused on the “embodied experience” of immaterial labour, zeroing in on the tension between capital’s strategies of value-creation and the flesh of living labour, exploited and resistant, under post-Fordism. Many of these concerns can perhaps be traced to the choice of terminology, in particular the use of the word “immaterial” within a tradition that emerges from a materialist approach. On this Alisa Del Re (2005, 54) makes an important clarification: “production is certainly immaterial, but … this cannot come into reality independently of bodies.”

Autonomist theory has, since the earlier phases of its trajectory, lost touch to some degree with the practice of carrying out rigorous inquiries into material instances of struggle or, as others have pointed out using its own lexicon, with beginning from an exploration of class composition
Autonomist theory has become increasingly fashionable within academic circles, and has, at least in its Anglophone adoptions, frequently been applied towards the production of esoteric theory where the only struggle produced is that of the lay reader attempting to understand what exactly is being said. Bringing narratives of both friction-free capitalism and idealized immaterial labour down from the heavenly bodies to their earthly counterparts might therefore be understood as a task of *materializing immaterial labour*. One way to do this is by examining those moments in which the exploitation of immaterial labour reaches a breaking point, and where immaterial labour rebels and begins to organize for itself. To pick up Braverman’s metaphor once more, it means exploring the subterranean streams animating post-Fordism, as well as when and how they emerge into the open and flow counter to capital’s desires.

If we agree that immaterial labour (or knowledge work) exists, that the exploitation of such labour is a fact under post-Fordism, and that labour resistance to such exploitation is not only possible but desirable, the next step is to consider the trajectory of our research. Having come to this point our certainties end and the hard work begins, for politically committed research involves the engagement with and exploration of moments of struggle occurring within the organization of immaterial labour. The perspective and methods relevant to picking up such a project from an activist, or immanent perspective, as well as some of the ways in which such inquiries are being carried out on a post-Fordist terrain, are discussed in the next chapter.

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20 As Nick Dyer-Witheford (and others) have suggested, the situation “calls for a project along the lines of what Marx called a ‘workers’ inquiry, involving a network of researchers involved in participatory study of emergent forms of struggles” (1999, 232).
Chapter 3
Epistemology and Method in a Worker Inquiry

In order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts to dissociate those relations. (Michel Foucault 2000, 329)

This chapter constructs a conceptual and practical foundation for immanent inquiries into the organization of immaterial labour. By immanence, I mean the quality of existing within. In the context of research, I understand immanent inquiry as inextricably bound up with, and a part of, its subject matter. The chapter begins with a consideration of ontology and moves on to epistemology in order to arrive at a discussion of method. Throughout, I draw on theoretical traditions that have been developed in various degrees of tension with the broader discipline of sociology.

One of the key premises guiding this dissertation is that critiques, resistances, and revolts are the greatest determinant of the actions of constituted forms of power. This process is at work within academic disciplines as well, and there are many excellent examples within the field of sociology. Much of the sociological research into labour during the postwar period was preoccupied with how to achieve the proper management of organizations, including how to manage knowledge workers. These researchers were developing a sociology that was of utility to industry’s requirement for the increasingly efficient application of scientific management within the labour process, including the study of “worker motivation” (Hirszowicz 1982, 78-97) in the face of the increasingly intense rhythms of the Fordist assembly line and labour’s organized resistance to it. In Labor and Monopoly Capital, Harry Braverman denounced those colleagues of
his “whose ‘sociology’ pursues apologetic purposes” (1999, 241). As Braverman pointed out, making the choice to begin with problems such as these was already to choose sides, for as he demonstrated in his classic text, “Taylor’s ‘science of work’ is never to be developed by the worker, always by management” (Ibid, 79). Such research was aimed at ensuring that workers and the labour process were organized by capital, rather than labour.

Braverman’s book, and others like it, have contributed to a healthy and vibrant sub-field within sociology dedicated to the critical study of workers and the labour process, a veritable science of work developed by, or at the very least in solidarity with, the worker (Sobel 1989, Smith, Knights and Wilmott 1991). Intellectual projects such as these, ones that carve out a space in which they may thrive and trouble the concerns that dominate the field, are examples of what Gilles Deleuze called “minor” traditions. These traditions are those that tend to be overlooked, that do not have grand designs beyond sustaining themselves and the forces they support. Whereas “majority assumes a state of power and domination,” minority is “potential, creative and created, becoming” (Deleuze and Guattari 2002, 105-106). A minority is always a potential threat to a majority, especially when its members “demand to formulate their problems for themselves, and to determine at least the particular conditions under which they can receive a more general solution” (Ibid, 471, emphasis added). Feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith illustrates this concept when she relates the challenges of simultaneously working within sociology and attempting to develop a feminist standpoint: “recognizing, exploring, and working within it means finding alternative ways of thinking and inquiry to those that would implicate us in the sociological practice of the relations of ruling” (1990, 20). The concept of a “minor” sociology is a fitting theme for this chapter, given that its entire scaffolding is developed out of such
approaches, ones that have produced alternative epistemological positions, methodological tools, and the ongoing transformation of the discipline.

The chapter begins with a discussion of immanent ontology as the basis for epistemology and method. Ontology is understood here as the result of asking the question: “What is?” The concept of immanence, as existing within, is opposed to that of transcendence, or existing apart. My approach takes its lead from the concepts of immanence and parallelism developed within the work of the seventeenth century philosopher Spinoza. In the subsequent section on epistemology, which I understand as a strategy for knowing the world, I consider two challenges to positivist sociological epistemological discourses that have marked the discipline since the 1970s. The first is French philosopher Michel Foucault’s reflections on genealogy, resistance, and subjugated knowledges. The second is the body of women’s theory that has pointed to the value of developing a feminist “standpoint” within sociology. Moving from epistemology to method, in the next section I survey a series of sociological approaches to the study of labour that have chosen engagement with workers and their experience as a component of their methodologies. Some of these approaches, including those of David Riesman, Grace Lee Boggs and Paul Romano, were picked up across the Atlantic in post-War Italy and became agents of an unlikely cross-fertilization between American sociology and Italian autonomist, or workerist, Marxism. In the rest of the section on methodology I first return to Italian post-War history in order to examine the context and motivations for the autonomists’ development of the worker inquiry and conricerca (co-research), and subsequently survey some of the ways in which these methods are being implemented today. I conclude the chapter by discussing how these positions and theories have influenced my choice of case studies and the methods adopted in their study.
3.1 Immanent Ontology

Within Western Enlightenment philosophy, it is relatively easy to draw a line of “major” philosophers, beginning in the seventeenth century with Renee Descartes, passing through Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant, and GWF Hegel. These thinkers constructed their philosophical systems in the eye of the Enlightenment storm and well into modernity, and were key figures in eroding the role of the divine within philosophy, particularly as they had inherited it from the medieval philosophers such as Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and others. Be this as it may, this philosophical lineage is characterized by some nagging problems, beginning with the question of ontology.

These philosophers offer us, in different ways and to different degrees, ontologies of dualism and transcendence. Their ontologies are dualistic, or dialectical, in that in their writings reality is constantly split in two – between forms and appearance, mind and body, human and divine, human and nature, etc. These divisions and pairings are not without political and epistemological consequences, as they regularly contain within them an implicit or explicit privileging of one of the two parts. It is the world of forms that has precedence over and transcends the world of appearances, the mind that transcends the body, “mankind” which transcends nature, God’s activity that transcends that of humans, and so on. As much as Enlightenment philosophers attempt to curtail the role of God and carve out a more central role for the human subject in their systems, the divine and transcendent perpetually returns, and when it does not, humans merely
usurp God’s place. Not only do these patterns reinforce familiar divisions that have very real consequences in the structuring of our contemporary day-to-day lives (white and black, man and woman, straight and gay, citizen and illegal alien, etc), but, most importantly, between the two there is often an implied relationship of dependence, like that of the master and the slave in the well-known Hegelian example. The slave needs the master to transcend his status. Women need men to transcend theirs. Humans need God to transcend theirs, and so on. For Hegel, who offers the best example of this lineage, differences such as these are resolved dialectically, in a process he refers to as Aufhebung, or sublation. This is a dynamic movement toward the whole, where thesis and antithesis create a third, entirely new position that is the result of both. As a practical illustration of this, labour and capital might be thought of as dialectically creating a third position at some point in history (for the knowledge worker theorists that point is now), a position that involves a resolution of their historical tensions.

There is a different line one can trace through Western philosophy when considering the question of ontology (Deleuze 1988, 1990, Hardt 1993, Negri, 1991, 1999b). Where the former begins with Descartes, this line emerges most powerfully with Spinoza, and can be seen as the philosophical antagonist of the dualist and transcendent versions of ontology that have prevailed within Western continental philosophy since the dawn of Modernity. For a series of radical thinkers Spinoza has represented an alternate, materialist and radical philosophical escape route out of several of the problems presented by modernity. Spinoza, responding to the work of

21 As Todd May suggests, “the primacy of the human subject is not a return to immanence, not an immersion in the world, but transcendence carried on by other means (2005, 28)
22 As Louis Althusser suggested, “Spinoza’s philosophy introduced an unprecedented revolution in the history of philosophy, probably the greatest revolution of all time, insofar as we can regard Spinoza as Marx’s only direct ancestor, from the philosophical standpoint” (1977, 102).
Descartes, takes a dramatically different path, casting aside dualism in order to replace it with a monistic ontology, or one of absolute immanence.

Spinoza’s *Ethics* begins the geometric exposition of his argument by undermining, on the very first page, the basis for most of the dualist versions of ontology. What Spinoza calls “substance” is the basis of the natural world: “By *substance* I mean that which is *in itself and is conceived through itself*; that is, that the conception of which does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed” (1992, 31, emphasis mine). Everything – including ourselves, the earth we inhabit, the air we breathe, is composed of substance. Emerging out of substance, in Spinoza’s system we find attributes, which express themselves in modes. Todd May offers a useful metaphor:

Japanese origami is the folding of paper into different recognizable figures: swans, turtles, people, trees. In origami, there is no cutting of the paper. No outside elements are introduced into it. Everything happens as an expression of that particular piece of paper: It is only the paper that is folded and refolded into new arrangements, those arrangements being the modes of the paper, which is the origami’s substance. The extension of the paper would be its attribute. If we can imagine the paper’s being able to fold and unfold itself, we come closer to the concept of expression. Further, we must see each figure as part of a process, not a finished product, if we are to grasp the temporal character of substance (2005, 38).

The general direction of this train of thought may offer some context for why Spinoza was forced to publish his books anonymously, suffered a painful banishment (a *cherem*) from the Amsterdam Jewish community, and, although we are not sure of this, became the victim of a stabbing. He was certainly not *openly* theorizing atheism in seventeenth century Amsterdam, for all of the city’s relative tolerance. Indeed Spinoza spends the first part of the *Ethics* discussing God in great detail. “By God I mean an absolutely infinite being; that is, substance consisting of
infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence” (1992, 31). He concludes that “there can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God” (Ibid, 39). If humans are merely expressions of God, who is substance, then the first result of this is that there is no division between god and us, no more than there is between the piece of paper and the origami turtle. It also means that, not being distinct from anything in nature, God becomes everything. From here it is a small step, as Spinoza’s detractors suggested, to atheism.

As humans, in the course of our daily existences we come into composition with the forces around us, whether these are food, other humans, animals, ecosystems, etc. For Spinoza, within these compositions, we can either experience joy (if our ability to act is expanded), or sadness (if the reverse is true and our ability to act is diminished). As Deleuze described, if I come into composition with good food I experience joy, whereas if I come into composition with poisoned food, I die. This notwithstanding, we are all expressions of the same substance, internal to it. It follows from this immanent ontology that humans do not need something transcendent, i.e., something more or other than what exists, in order to experience what Spinoza calls joyful passions. Everything begins as one, and, in its infinite expressions of that substance, only needs to come into differing compositions in order to increase its potential for action.

This ontology may seem exceptionally abstract, yet it is worth remembering that it can have important repercussions within political analysis. The common example used is that of Thomas Hobbes. While Hobbes suggests in Leviathan that the unruly “multitude” must become a people in the body of the sovereign (from many to one) and thus submit to the King, State, etc, for Spinoza and his interlocutors the path to a joyful form of life is the inverse: the multitude from its univocity must become many in expanding and infinitely re-articulating compositions. We find
the same repercussions in Hegel’s philosophy. Where in Hegel two things combine in order to create a third, transcendent thing, in Spinoza this transcendence does not make sense, since whatever compositions are created remain within, or an expression of, substance. Authors such as Negri and Deleuze thus read the notion of immanence politically, suggesting that this “existing within” is a perpetual source of potential autonomy. Therefore, immanence means humans do not need God for deliverance, labour does not need capital to run a factory, women do not need men to be sexual, etc.

The second key ontological point for this dissertation, also contained in the writings of Spinoza, is parallelism, a position the philosopher employs via the notion of affect. With parallelism, Spinoza takes on the key division in Western Enlightenment philosophy, that which is commonly made between the mind and the body. In refusing any such split, Spinoza not only denies that any causality between mind and body, but he refuses to privilege one over the other (Deleuze 1988, 18). Our body does not “make us” want things that the “reason” of the mind is capable of overcoming. Rather, parallelism suggests that mind and body absolutely correspond. As Spinoza says, “The body cannot determine the mind to think, nor can the mind determine the body to rest, or to anything else (if there is anything else)” (1992, 104, emphasis in original). One does not, as in Cartesian and other idealist forms of thought, act without the other, and therefore one cannot be considered without the other. Affect is what is created when bodies come into combination with each other, and is, accordingly, at once a physical and mental product. This concept, as we saw in the last chapter, is directly relevant to how service sector and informational work is being theorized under post-Fordism as affective labour. Most importantly, as it flows from Spinoza’s
parallelism, the notion of affect offers a way of thinking about immaterial labour that sidelines largely irresolvable debates over “mental” versus “physical” labour. 23

This particular dualism has created numerous problems for the theorization of communication over the last century. As Dan Schiller (1996) has documented, it is responsible for the production a series of theoretical approaches that have separated “communication” and “labour,” creating a frequently artificial polarization that has led to conceptual and practical problems everywhere from the theorization of the culture industries to the organization of white-collar labour.

Schiller’s own work is an attempt to remedy this split within the field of communication, uniting the two along the lines of political economy’s old concern with social totality. As I suggest later in this chapter and argue more in-depth in Chapter 7 in my discussion of the subsumption of immaterial labour, the need for what Schiller calls a “non-dualistic” (x) approach to communication has become all the more urgent in post-Fordism, where labour and communication have increasingly become difficult to distinguish from one another. This process, which Mosco and McKercher (2008, forthcoming) refer to as the “labouring of communication,” requires something we could tentatively call a labour theory of communication. Without - as Richard Day warns against (2005) - suggesting that labour is an essential or overriding key to

23 As Michael Denning (1997, 96) points out: “the division between mental and manual labor is one of the founding oppositions of all socialist thought, and it lurks behind many of the classic “problems” of socialist theory and politics. The relations between workers and intellectuals in social movements; the debate over the relations between “economic forces” and “ideology,” and the metaphor of base and superstructure; the polemics over “vulgar materialism” and “idealism,” as well as the more subtle exploration of the relations between social being and social consciousness; the controversies over the “deskilling” of work: these questions which haunt the socialist and Marxist traditions are all elaborations of the fundamental antinomy of mental and manual labor.”
understanding communication or social relations, I believe this project is a valuable one, particularly if it begins with an immanent, activist approach.

I would like to close the discussion of Spinoza’s, ontology by pointing out the effects such an approach has on the understanding of power relations, a concern that is central to this dissertation. In the Dutch philosopher’s view, power can be subdivided into two categories: potentia (constituted power) and potenza (constituent power). The first is a smothering force (the power of the sovereign, of capital, and of sad passions), while the latter is a creative, affirmative one (the power of the multitude, of living labour, and of joyful passions). While this division may appear to be the generation of another binary, and therefore transcendent thinking, it is not. First of all, there is no transcendence, as both forces are expressions of substance. More importantly, potenza is always potentially autonomous, meaning there is always a potential imbalance, since constituted power always needs constituent power to exist (there can be no ruler without a people, no capital without labour, etc).

This brief outline of Spinoza’s immanent ontology offers us the foundations for a worker inquiry. The notion of immanence, or of existing within, is important to this dissertation in three distinct but interrelated ways. The first is in the epistemological positions that are produced when one adopts an immanent approach to sociological research, ones we explore in the next section. The second is a result of the political reading of the concept, that is, that a force does not require anything external in order to affirm itself – immanence as a research strategy means that one

24 This dynamic appears in different ways in the work of Gilles Deleuze (1990), Michel Foucault (1998), and Antonio Negri (1991, 1999b).
avoids engagement with transcendent forces (in epistemology it means side-stepping appeals to objectivity, while in the realm of methodology it means opting for a process of knowledge production that is worker rather than management-driven). This approach is also compatible with the more progressive streams of thought that have always been a part of the labour movement, from the Argentinean worker recovered enterprises movement’s cooperativism to European traditions of anarcho-syndicalism and council communism. Finally, parallelism allows us to avoid endlessly arguing over dualisms such as that between “mental” and “manual” labour, and the concept of affect is helpful to the analysis of an age where growing numbers of people are involved in jobs that do not produce physical objects but instead produce emotions, situations, information, relationships, or communication.

3.2 Immanent Epistemology: Subjugated Knowledges and Feminist Standpoints

The only way of knowing a socially constructed world is knowing it from within
(Dorothy Smith, 1990, 22)

To get from immanent ontology to the methods required for an inquiry into the organization of digital labour, it is first necessary to confront epistemology. For the purposes of this dissertation, I understand epistemology as a strategy for knowing the world. Michel Foucault’s work on genealogy, subjugated knowledges, and resistance offers us one way to move from ontology to epistemology. In the course of his lectures at the Collège de France of the mid-seventies, Foucault suggested what he had been trying to look at since the beginning of that decade was “the ‘how’ of power” (2003, 24). Foucault’s “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” essay, written in 1971, is the key step Foucault took towards developing a theory of power, and one which can aid this dissertation’s transition from ontology to epistemology.
The *Genealogy* essay outlines an approach that characterizes Foucault’s subsequent historical inquiries. In this essay Foucault engages with ontology (although he does not refer to it as such), and, following Nietzsche, rejects the search for historical “origin” [*Ursprung*] in favour of the analysis of *Enstehung*, or “emergence.” As in Spinoza’s immanent ontology, Foucault discourages us from the search for origins because this would entail an attempt to find things in history that are completely new – an ontological impossibility. Rather, for Nietzsche and Foucault, it is the “emergence” (of social movements, forms of domination, modes of discourse, etc) we ought to be attuned to, an emergence which is “always produced through a particular stage of forces” (1998, 376) and therefore always contains what came before it, albeit in mutant form.

Foucault’s discussion of genealogy is useful to the inquiries in this dissertation. One example of how relevant his approach is comes when we use it to consider the explosion of forms of digital work across developed G8 economies with post-Fordism. Here genealogy offers us some very useful ways to situate the topic of this dissertation historically. We have seen how liberal-democratic theorists regularly suggest that both the forms of work and the social relations within the informational economy are completely “new,” an approach which causes them to treat collective organizing among workers as a kind of anachronism. A genealogical approach would lead us to adopt a different perspective, noting first of all how it is possible to trace immaterial labour back, in different forms, to our earliest days as humans. Thus the question becomes not

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25 A more thorough sketch of the Foucauldian genealogy would include a discussion of several texts from the period between 1969 and 1973, within which three key works were produced: the *Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002a), “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1998), and “Truth and Juridical Forms (2002b), a set of five lectures given at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro in 1973.
one of proving that immaterial labour is “new”, but of appreciating how only relatively recently it has become much more central to value-creation under capitalism. In similar fashion, the forms of collective organization by immaterial labourers examined in this dissertation cannot be understood as completely “new.” Rather, collective organization itself has gone through endless iterations (think of guilds, labour unions, worker’s halls, soviets, etc) and therefore the forms of organization analyzed in this dissertation are merely the recomposition of older forms into different articulations. The interesting question, therefore, becomes what forms emergent collective organizing within the expanding ranks of digital workers will take, and how these will contain older forms within themselves in new articulations. Similarly, seen from the perspective of genealogy, the informational economy itself is not something completely “new” (as when, for example, Peter Drucker suggests we are “post-capitalist”), but rather a different form of an economic system that has been with us for centuries.

Genealogy allows us to sidestep relatively fruitless debates over origins (when did immaterial labour begin? How new is informational capitalism?) in order to focus on more important questions of emergence and determination, and therefore to situate our specific inquiries within the general problem of why particular historical forces manifest so strongly at some times and not others. Liberal-democratic theorists, as we have seen, regularly explain the rapid growth of digital labour as some form of destiny, the culmination of a reasonably fixed historical path determined by the relationship between markets on the one hand and technology on the other. Such perspectives, suggesting as they do an ultimate end for exploitation and labour struggles, are understandably comforting. Yet when using genealogy to confront the reasons for the emergence of both the informational economy and modes of resistance to it, we meet a Foucault who is close
Having established this basic understanding of genealogy, there are two ways it can be employed. The first is as a history of the present, or an analysis of the clash of forces that resulted in our current historical conjuncture. This is what Foucault was doing when he wrote his histories of sexuality, or of forms of punishment. Rather than emphasizing historical harmony, this kind of genealogy analyzes the forces’ “interaction, the manner of the struggle that these forces wage against each other or against adverse circumstances, and the attempt to avoid degeneration and regain strength by dividing these forces against themselves” (1998, 376). This type of approach exposes the “endlessly repeated play of dominations” and power relations, fixed “in rituals, in meticulous procedures that impose rights and obligations” (Ibid, 377). A history of the present might therefore look back at the conflicts within Fordist factories and the debates within management circles as to how to contain them in order to explain the emergence of the information society (as Boltanski and Chiapello [2006] have done in the French context). My dissertation certainly takes some inspiration from this kind of genealogy (the preceding chapter outlined the struggle of intellectual traditions against each other and the effects of that struggle on the formation of workers, workplaces, and the labour process), but, given that my inquiry remains anchored in the present, it favours a second understanding of Foucault’s approach.

A brief aside before we deal with this second way of employing genealogy. Up to this point it might seem as if genealogy is merely a catalogue of historical domination and subordination, a tracing through history of ever-perfecting systems of power and the ever-diminishing power to act by subjects. This would be a mistake however, as the work of Foucault does not overlook
resistance. Rather, from the aforementioned genealogy essay onwards, he becomes increasingly preoccupied with struggles, also as a result of his own political involvement during the turbulent post-May ’68 period in France. As a way of setting up the second notion of genealogy, then, it is useful to briefly return to some of his thoughts on resistance in another essay, “The Subject and Power.”

Foucault begins by suggesting that the objective of his work thus far has been to “create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (1994, 326). Yet in the search for what he refers to as a “different economy of power relations”, Foucault suggests a different way of approaching the problem:

… a way that is more empirical, more directly related to our present situation, and one that implies more relations between theory and practice. It consists in taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point. To use another metaphor, it consists in using this resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used. Rather than analyzing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, it consists of analyzing power relations through the antagonism of strategies (Ibid, 329, emphasis added).

Yet how are we to go about knowing power relations through the “forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations” (Ibid)? This is where the second notion of genealogy comes in. This strategy involves an exploration and validation of what Foucault referred to as the “subjugated knowledges” of those who resist (2003, 7). These knowledges, he suggests, are ones that “have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity” (Ibid). Foucault refers to these as “knowledges from below,” and posits them as a part of what he refers to as an “autonomous and noncentralized
theoretical production, in other words a theoretical production that does not need a visa from some common regime to establish its validity” (Ibid, 6). Here “local memories” are to be coupled with “scholarly erudition,” a combination that allows us, according to Foucault, “to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics” (Ibid, 8).

It is important to remember that Foucault was discussing these subjugated knowledges in 1975-76 - a moment in which he suggested these knowledges and the social movements they were a part of had reappeared with force. Whether or not he feels that the usefulness of these subjugated knowledges as a way to cut into the understanding of the social relations is valid at all times is unclear. It is quite possible that Foucault is suggesting that, in moments where constituted power takes the upper hand again, one ought to return to a study of how it manages to crush or prevent such resistant voices. This notwithstanding, beginning an analysis of social relations with resistance, for reasons I will go into below, is useful in itself, whatever the degree of social struggle or the appearance of subjugated knowledges.

This dissertation employs the genealogy as the practice of bringing subjugated knowledges to the surface in order to make use of them in ongoing struggles. As was suggested in the previous chapter, not only have the local, situated knowledges of exploited and sometimes resistant digital workers been drowned out by liberal-democratic odes to the information society, but they have rarely received the attention they deserve within both critical perspectives on the degradation of labour and autonomist approaches. Within the information society, both the exploitation of immaterial labour and the latter’s struggles have been largely silenced.
So far we have seen how the genealogy provides a strong transition between an immanent ontology and an epistemology that begins its practice of knowing power relations through an examination of resistance. This approach challenges forms of sociology that are concerned with “social problems” – lack madness, absenteeism, delinquency, etc. In their stead, Foucault proposes other kinds of knowledge - that of the psychiatrized, the patient, the delinquent, etc. These are immanent approaches to knowledge. As we shall see, feminist standpoint theory is one such form of immanent theoretical production that has reconfigured sociology and, on a much smaller scale, influenced these inquiries.

Before we move on to standpoint theory however, I would like to flag the emergence, within Foucault’s discussion of the genealogy, of a tension that will become more acute as we move onwards through this chapter. This tension, almost imperceptible in Foucault’s 1975-76 lectures, is to be found in his remark about genealogy being the combination of “scholarly erudition” and “local knowledges.” Why does Foucault posit a division between the two, and how might this generate problems for an immanent epistemology of immaterial labour?

For all of his valourization of subjugated knowledges, Foucault still recognized important moments of difference between his own position and those of the literally hundreds of accounts he brought to light thanks to his archival work. Certainly Foucault himself was affected by some of the power systems he documented, and therefore his critique of them remains, to a great extent, immanent. Yet he was also well aware that his position as a scholar was much different than that of the incarcerated delinquent or institutionalized psychiatric patient. We hear their voices in his texts because Foucault, the scholar who was, after all, coddled by a nation, decides to validate them. There is an obvious power differential here, one that persisted in Foucault’s work on
behalf of prisoners during the 1970s and one that brings an unavoidable tension to light for those aiming for the adoption of immanent epistemologies. What is our position with respect to the subjugated knowledges we seek to validate? For the moment, let us leave this tension in abeyance and continue with our exploration of immanent epistemological approaches however.

Feminist standpoint theory has also explicitly challenged dominant practices of producing knowledge within sociology. If Foucault was able to fashion his counter-histories with virtually no disciplinary strictures placed upon him, a generation of women entering sociology departments during the 1960s and 1970s faced a different set of boundaries and impositions. In the rest of this section I explore the work of theorists such as Nancy Hartsock, Sandra Harding, Dorothy Smith, Patricia Hill Collins and Donna Haraway, and reflect on its importance to the inquiries undertaken for this dissertation. These thinkers were forced to engage with a sociological epistemology that regularly took experience for granted as the experience of men.

26 In the consideration of this question, and throughout this dissertation, I am indebted to Richard Day’s discussion of “affinity”-based radical social movements and their navigation of the fraught terrain of relations between and within movements working for social change (2005). My work is also informed by an accumulating set of personal experiences within political groups operating on what is frequently referred to as an “anti-oppression” framework, where different forms of oppression (racism, patriarchy, hetero-normativity, classism, ableism, etc) are seen as intersecting and no one struggle is accorded priority over others.

27 Another important methodology that emerged at the same time as feminist standpoint theory is action research. Action research developed in North America during the postwar years in order to mitigate the effects of positivist methodologies within social science aiming to produce objective and dispassionate understandings of social processes (Kemmis 1998, Greenwood and Levin 1998). In response, action research touted the desirability of the researcher’s participation in the communities studied as well as the community’s participation in the generation of knowledge and action able to address social problems. Such a methodological orientation was configured as an open, spiral-like process, where research findings were regularly returned to and evaluated in order to feed into new knowledge and the production of solutions. Action research practitioners have historically touted the benefits of collective decision-making processes. As I suggest in the conclusion, this dissertation, although inspired by some of the more progressive uses of this (Footnote continues on following page)
and thus their work offers another example of what I discussed at the beginning of the chapter as a “minor” tradition. Their thinking is important to this dissertation because of their engagement with sociology and their efforts to validate the experiences of those excluded by dominant paradigms and approaches. Their approach has also made key contributions to the sociology of labour, producing foundational feminist analyses of domestic and emotional labour. Feminist standpoint epistemology also instructively illuminates the perils that lurk within immanent approaches to knowledge production.

As Dorothy Smith pointed out, feminist scholars entering the academy are “situated as sociologists across a contradiction” between their discipline and their experience of the world (1990, 19). This condition is at the root of ongoing attempts to develop an epistemology capable of confronting such a contradiction. Standpoint theory as a specifically feminist epistemology emerged within the North American women’s liberation movement and alongside socialist feminist debates of the 1970’s surrounding women’s domestic work. While these thinkers shared a belief that Marxism held a great deal of explanatory power as a theoretical system aimed at the understanding of class, they also pointed out how, as far as gender relations in general and the gendered division of labour in particular, the lives of women were rendered invisible within male-elaborated versions of historical-materialist thought. The result of this critique was a feminist re-elaboration of Marxism, and a series of debates regarding the role of women’s work within capitalism and its status as either productive or unproductive labour. This was a broad project, which as we saw in the previous chapter was sustained by important contributions from the Italian autonomist feminists of the Wages for Housework movement (Dalla Costa and James

method, cannot consider itself a part of the tradition due to the limited participation the workers I (Footnote continues on following page)
1972, Dalla Costa 2008 [forthcoming], Fortunati 1995). As Kathi Weeks notes, “reproductive ‘women’s work’, which is at once necessary to and marginalized by capitalist valorization processes, was posed as a potential source of feminist standpoints: alternative knowledges, resistant subjectivities, and feminist collectivities” (2007, 5).

As Foucault pointed out, feminist standpoint epistemology was part of a broader pattern of social struggles and their associated challenges to knowledge that gained strength in the late sixties. One example is the consciousness raising groups in North America, where women met to discuss and compare their experiences of the world as a part of both creating counter-knowledges and emphasizing the political nature of women’s personal lives under patriarchy (Malo de Molina 2006).

Feminist standpoint theory offers a compelling example of the development of an immanent epistemology, or a “minor” tradition of inquiry. Nancy Hartsock (1998) began her elaboration of standpoint theory by asking how it might be possible to fashion a critique of patriarchy through an epistemology that could “take over a number of aspects of Marx’s method” (Ibid, 106). Hartsock begins by adopting Marx’s own immanent epistemology: “I set off from Marx’s proposal that a correct vision of class society is available only from one of those two major class positions in capitalist society” (Ibid). In doing so, she draws from a “minor” position, that of the working class, situating herself, and therefore her epistemology, within it. Given that the experiences of women are drastically different than those of men in patriarchal society, this approach, when extended to the field of gender relations, becomes not only necessary for interviewed had in the formulation of the research problems and conclusions.
Feminist standpoints are not limited to developing a perspective on oppression. Rather, they aim both to “see and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women” and “apply the vision and knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change” (Brooks 2006, 55). The feminist standpoint, for Hartsock (1998), is the effect of a double engagement with material life. Firstly, the standpoint is constituted out of material life, which “not only structures but sets the limits on the understanding of social relations” (Ibid, 107) - one experiences the world as a “welfare mom” because of the material practices that led to the emergence of the category (the existence of labour as a commodity, of patriarchy, the rise and subsequent decline of the welfare state, etc). For Hartsock and others, however, the fact that one’s perspective is constituted out of material forces, or history, is not enough on its own to generate a feminist standpoint. A standpoint does not come naturally, but is “achieved” (Ibid, 110) due to the ideological dominance of men in the social sphere. In other words, the second meaning of how the feminist standpoint is “engaged” is a political one, stemming from an acquired antagonistic understanding, or consciousness, of the person who knows. A feminist epistemology is, therefore, produced by the material relations that create the basis for a standpoint, but subjects must come to understand those relations in order to generate a valid standpoint.
The work of Dorothy Smith (1990) has considered these questions and their effects on the discipline of sociology more directly. Her question is simple and charged with potential: “Thinking more boldly or perhaps just thinking the whole thing through further brings us to ask how a sociology might look if it began from a woman’s standpoint and what might happen to a sociology that attempts to deal seriously with that standpoint (Ibid, 12).

Positivist variants of sociology (as heirs to the Cartesian dualism we began this chapter by discussing) champion objectivity, or the “separation of what is known from knowers’ interests, ‘biases’ and so forth” (Ibid, 16). This reproduces what Smith calls the “governing mode” of our society and its bifurcation of experience: “one located in the body and in the space it occupies and moves in, the other passing beyond it” (Ibid, 17). Smith and other feminist standpoint theorists are united in pointing out that they have been taught to ignore such embodied experience in favour of a transcendent reason, a tradition of epistemological practice that has actively been employed against women, and which is bolstered by longstanding gender stereotypes. This is another example of the subjugation of immanence by a duality (mind and body) and a favouring of one over the other. For Smith it is this separation of experience that must become undone in the elaboration of a feminist standpoint, or an immanent epistemology. The socialist-feminist answer to the sociological valourization of transcendent “reason” was to develop a response that began with the epistemological validation of their embodied experience. As Smith suggests, “the inner principles of our theoretical work remain lodged outside us” (Ibid, 21).

Such an approach to knowledge generation offers a premise integral to the inquiries undertaken for this dissertation. Who better to discuss the exploitative forms of labour in digital work than digital workers? Who better to offer insights into emerging compositions within immaterial
labour than the workers who are creating them? Yet as I have suggested, feminist standpoint theory also alerts us to potential problems in the adoption of an immanent epistemology. At the exact moment that Smith and others seem to have established such a basis for inquiry, some problems for feminist standpoint theory begin to emerge. For Smith, feminist standpoint theory must “transcend the contradiction” of the aforementioned bifurcated consciousness (Ibid, 21). For her part, Hartsock also resorts to transcendent thinking, suggesting that there is “a duality of levels of reality.” Within reality, therefore, there is a “deeper level or essence,” which she contrasts to “the ‘surface’ or appearance.” Under capitalism and patriarchy, the latter distorts and inverts the former (1998, 108).

There are challenges generated within any “minor” approach to knowledge as it begins to develop and gain strength, ones from which feminist standpoint theory is not exempt. The ethical problems that emerge in this process can be obscured by approaches that see immanent epistemologies as implicitly free of tensions, or “pure.” We have seen in Foucault’s work how the power differentials between scholarly production of knowledge and local memories, regardless of the kinds of composition they enter into with each other (participatory action research, co-research, worker inquiry, oral histories, etc), exist and cannot be ignored. Hartsock’s project for feminist standpoint is to develop an epistemology that is able to include “all of human activity” by including the perspective of women, a goal that is achievable since “there are things common to all women’s lives within Western class societies” (1983, 113). Such a statement illuminates the kinds of ethical problems that can emerge within immanent perspectives, ones that have been flagged by other traditions of inquiry. Queer theory and anti-racist theory have both challenged attempts such as Hartsock’s to define their experience for them. How can Hartsock’s theory adequately assess the embodied experiences of Philippina women working in silicon chip
factories in California, or queer women demonstrating against gay marriage, any more than the male Cartesian epistemology can comprehend the experience of women? Within an immanent approach there are different voices, and ethical difficulties will inevitably arise when we make claims on behalf of whatever category we position ourselves within.

Feminist standpoint theory presents other problems as well. If a standpoint is “achieved,” in the sense that there is a deeper level of reality which we do not all have access to, why ought we necessarily validate the embodied experiences such as those of women, or workers, of people of colour, etc? If they are not privy, as we are, to the knowledge of the real material relations which structure their lives, does this not merely create another type of transcendence, where women academics can explain the world to gullible welfare moms in the sway of ideology and therefore lift them out of their ignorance, or the trained knowledge workers of academia can show call centre workers the real relations of production that they live day in and day out? This obviously reinforces already-existing hierarchies and transcendent approaches within the production of knowledge - if embodied experience is valuable, why can it not be valuable on its own terms?

This is not an attempt to pillory the tradition of feminist standpoint theory, but rather to use some of the questions that arise from its earlier articulations in the development of an ethical and effective epistemology. We can begin simply by noting how there are always “minor” traditions within “minor” traditions. Patricia Hill Collins, for example, discusses the position of black women as being one of an “outsider-within” spaces such as academia (2000, 10-13), an ambivalent role she traces back to the accounts of domestic work by black women slaves which allowed them a privileged vantage point on classed, raced, and gendered social relations. While I would not want to suggest some kind of equivalence in my own project, in researching the case
studies to come I have done my best to keep some of these questions, tensions, and problems in mind. But before we discuss how these concerns have played themselves out in the elaboration of my methodology, in what follows, moving from epistemology to method, I discuss the sociological approaches to the examination of labour and autonomist worker inquiry.

3.3 Immanent Method: From the Down and Outers to the Worker Inquiry

Not a single government, whether monarchy or bourgeois republic, has yet ventured to undertake a serious inquiry into the position of the French working class. But what a number of investigations have been undertaken into crises — agricultural, financial, industrial, commercial, political! (Karl Marx 1880)

Indeed, if method is an activity of knowing… it must by now be a part of the mode of production, to be internal to it. (Antonio Negri 2003, 74)

In 1880 Karl Marx was asked by the *Revue Socialiste* to design an inquiry into the conditions of the French proletariat. The result was a document containing 101 questions that was distributed through workplaces across the country. In his preface to the questions, Marx proposes an immanent approach to the condition of worker exploitation:

> We hope to meet in this work with the support of all workers in town and country who understand that they alone can describe with full knowledge the misfortunes from which they suffer and that only they, and not saviors sent by providence, can energetically apply the healing remedies for the social ills which they are prey (2007).

His questionnaire offers a glimpse of a counter-sociology, a worker social science that, much like the standpoint epistemologies examined in the previous section, began from a situated and
political position. It also, however, raises once more the questions that have haunted attempts to develop the worker inquiry ever since. What was Marx trying to do with the French proletariat? Understand its composition? Bring them consciousness? Create an anti-capitalist knowledge of the labour process? Develop the basis for new forms of labour organization? As a result of questions much like these, the worker inquiry became, almost a century later, a source of inspiration and debate within early autonomist Marxism. Before we examine this little-known radical research methodology, I would like to provide a context for it through an overview of some of the sociological approaches to the study of work that have emerged from North America during the twentieth century.

3.3.1 The Down and Outers and Labour Process Ethnography

“Worse than at any other time in history,” was how, in June of 1920, Whiting Williams described the state of the relations between labour and capital in the United States. The statement opened the book - *What's on the Worker's Mind, By One Who Put On Coveralls to Find Out* (1921) - in which he claimed to have gauged the subjectivities at play in the menacing world of labour and its frequently violent relations with industrial capital. Williams, a post-graduate student at both the University of Berlin and University of Chicago at the beginning of the twentieth century, had a well-defined methodology and a clear goal for his research: disguise your identity, live with those whose lives you are studying, ensure that your actions and conclusions spring from your “thoughts” rather than your “feelings”, and hopefully develop a

28 Nonetheless, in an example all academic researchers working with “human subjects” will find humorous, Marx himself faced some of the same ethical concerns dealt with in this dissertation. An example from his preface: “The name of the working man or woman who is replying will not (Footnote continues on following page)
synthetic remedy for the social malaise you were observing. This method of social research took the author, under whose name on the first page of the book is inscribed “Formerly Personnel Director of the Hydraulic Pressed Steel Company,” into coal mines, railroad shops, shipyards, and oil refineries in the United States, Europe, and Central and South America through the first two decades of the twentieth century. Williams, in submitting to seven months of what he states at the outset of the account “ought to be an interesting and worthwhile adventure on the rough seas of ‘Common Labor’” (Ibid, 3), was above all interested in the development of a mutual understanding between capital and labour, one that was necessary to the “preservation and upbuilding of the life of our nation - and, perhaps, through it, of the world” (Ibid, v). His research methods and goals are eloquent examples of the occasionally classist, but more often bourgeois reformist impulses that have fueled variants of sociological research, ones that fit within what I have described as transcendent approaches to knowledge and politics.

The realm of methodological approaches to the study of work offers many examples of research that begins its analysis from a direct engagement with labour. The manner in which this engagement – occurring within twentieth century sociology, labour studies, or critical studies of media work - is conceived and executed however, has varied significantly. Some researchers, like Whiting, participated in what became a veritable American literary/sociological genre in the early part of the twentieth century, characterized by accounts of undercover explorations by the relatively well to do of the fearful and unknown world of workers and the poor. In an excellent essay on this literature and its authors, Mark Pittinger (1997, 26) suggests that the (frequently Chicago School of sociology-educated) “down-and-outers,” as he calls them, produced such

be published without special permission but the name and address should be given so that if (Footnote continues on following page)
research in order to “pursue the origins and implications of the belief that workers and the poor were somehow fundamentally different—a strange breed in classless America.”

This sentiment is of course a familiar one, given our recent examination of liberal-democratic distaste and disbelief when faced with the labour struggles occurring within networked capitalism. Fortunately, then as now, if these and other Chicago School sociologists were known for developing their research from the perspective of those aiming to solve the “social problems” or “social pathologies” of urban environments, some of their contemporaries were adopting more immanent approaches to labour research. A starting point for picking up the thread of this alternate methodological tradition can be found in the research of down-and-outer contemporary Annie Marion MacLean, a Canadian member of the Chicago School whose life’s work has, not surprisingly, been mostly effaced from the tradition’s history. MacLean, the University’s second-ever female to receive a doctoral degree in Sociology, taught there between 1903 (two years before Mother Jones, Big Bill Hayward, and other labour radicals would descend upon the city for the founding congress of the Industrial Workers of the World) and 1934, although (unlike her male colleagues) was never offered a full-time position. She began her engagement with the world of labour from a more openly political and committed position than that of Whiting Williams. Like the down-and-outers whose genre she unmistakably writes within, Maclean took numerous working class jobs for her research, filling the role of department store clerk, sweatshop worker, and hops picker during her undercover career. As opposed to Whiting Williams however, Maclean’s engagement with the world of labour did not result in scurrilous or fetishistic explanations of the worker’s hidden and mysterious subjectivity, but rather in necessary we can send communication” (Ibid).
denunciations of the injustices against workers that were the norm in these and other work sites during American Fordism. Maclean’s experiences were further sharpened by her sensitivity to women’s experience of work, observations that became the subject of her best-known book, \textit{Wage Earning Women} (1910).

Maclean’s “minor” tradition of engaged labour research methodology expanded and diversified within sociology’s twentieth century disciplinary trajectory. Ely Chinoi’s study of automobile factory workers in the early 1950s was particularly concerned with gauging the subjective aspects of their relationship to labour, something he teased out in his extensive use of interviews and qualitative data, providing a rich portrait of the disjuncture between individual aspirations and the realities of factory work (1955). During the Chicago School’s post-World War II period, or what some have referred to as the “second Chicago School” (Fine 1995, Venkatesh 2001), research undertaken by members of the University’s Center for Social Organizational Studies produced vivid accounts of Chicago’s local labour communities, including William Kornblum’s \textit{Blue Collar Community} (1975), a small-scale study of factory and community life in the South Chicago steel mill neighborhoods. At the same time as this work was being produced, the offshoot of sociological research into labour that was openly partisan in both its investigations and its methods became much more prominent. This work, as we shall see, would soon act as an unlikely inspiration for the earliest methodologies adopted by autonomist Marxists in Italy, and included David Riesman’s broad sociological reflections on the rapidly changing and alienated character of American Fordism, in particular (1950) \textit{The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character} and (1952) \textit{Faces in the Crowd: Individual Studies in Character and Politics}. Even as McCarthyism raged in the United States, still other sociological research would entirely abandon the pretense of objectivity and positivism. Marxist sociologists and militant
trade unionists Grace Lee Boggs (who wrote under her “party name” name, Ria Stone) and Paul Romano (2002) wrote of their labour struggles at a General Motors plant in their 1947 book, *The American Worker*. These accounts would appear in the dissident Marxist journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France and subsequently be translated into Italian in 1954 by early workerist Danilo Montaldi.  

The next and perhaps strongest wave of politically committed, labour-focused research within the discipline of sociology arrived in the wake of the political turbulence of the 1960s.  

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29 Boggs and Romano’s work was published in installments by the newspaper *Battaglia Comunista*, a political organ of the Partito Comunista Internazionalista. European socialists like Raniero Panzieri, anarchists like Anton Pannekoek, and others eagerly read it. Raya Dunayevskaya, herself a part of the American dissident communist (with CLR James) Johnson-Forrest tendency, suggests in her article “Socialism or Barbarism” (1954) that radical European intellectuals were fascinated with the *American Worker*: “Because the American worker has built no mass labor party, he seems non-political. Because he is largely unacquainted with the doctrines of Karl Marx, he seems non-socialist. Yet he is so militant and has thoughts of his own. Being uninhibited by European traditions, he has his own ways of expressing them. *The American Worker* illuminated this to so distinguished a Marxist intellectual as Pannekoek in a way nothing had previously. That is what is significant about it. The way in which this pamphlet is making its way in Europe (it has been translated into Italian and there will soon be a German translation), the way in which it is being received, is nothing but a sign of what is vital and what is important in American life.”

30 A key influence on such approaches to living labour are the analogous efforts undertaken by those who have offered histories of labour which are constructed “from below.” The most obvious example of this is the foundational work of E.P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (1966). Within this tradition are also to be found the excellent working-class and feminist histories of Linebaugh and Rediker (2000) *The many-headed hydra: Slaves, commoners, and the hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic*, Linebaugh (2003), *London hanged: Crime and civil society in the eighteenth century*, and Federici (2004), *Caliban and the witch: Women, the body, and primitive accumulation*. Also of note is the roughly parallel work that has occurred within the discipline of communication, where alternative histories of workers, the labour process, and the regulation of media industries have provided another rich stream of communication histories from the perspective of the oppressed. Here I am thinking, among others, of Schiller’s (1981), *Objectivity and the news: The public and the rise of commercial journalism* and (1996) *Theorizing communication*, McChesney and Solomon (Eds.), (1993), *Ruthless criticism: New perspectives in US communication history*, Martin (2003). *Hello* (Footnote continues on following page)
decade after this, of course, marked the entrance of larger numbers of Marxist researchers into academia. Their work, like Annie Marion MacLean’s and Paul Romano’s, not only involved methodological engagement with its subjects, but had political solidarity with them as its premise. In *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1973), sociologists Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb harked back to oral historians of labour such as Studs Terkel (2000), aiming, in the 150 interviews conducted between 1969-1970 for their book, to get a sense of the “everyday experiences of working class survival as well as the exceptional issues of success” (1973, 31). Throughout Sennett and Cobb’s examination we find them grappling with their desire for a more purely immanent methodology and a tension that emerges when this does not materialize: “We are upper-middle-class intellectuals talking to workers,” Sennett and Cobb (Ibid, 37) admit, “naturally we would put them uptight. Despite our best intentions, didn’t we make them feel inadequate?

The publication of Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital* in 1974 inaugurated a proliferation of research projects aimed at assessing the technical evolution of the labour process. Researchers such as Michael Burawoy reworked the ethnographic tradition of the Chicago School, developing the labour case study as a way of illuminating the social effects of the capitalist division of labour. In 1974-1975 Burawoy worked (with the explicit consent of management, which had been informed of his objectives) as a miscellaneous machine operator at central?" *Gender, technology, and culture in the formation of telephone systems*, and Fones-Wolf (2006) *Waves of opposition: Labor and the struggle for democratic radio.*

If the working class becomes noble in Sennett and Cobb’s depiction, the aura of the victim hangs nonetheless permeates their accounts, one the authors foster. While not a victim of its own vices and character failings (as in the down-and-outer accounts), work like that of Sennett and Cobb seems to have focused more on constructing a case for why labour was losing its battle with capital rather than searching for ways in which it could win.

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“Allied Corporation” for ten months, retracing the steps of the research carried out by the well-known Chicago School industrial sociologist Donald Roy, who in 1944 and 1945, during field work for his doctoral thesis worked at the same company, which he had then referred to as the Geer company (Burawoy 1979, 33). While such attempts at gauging the results of the labour process and its division yielded insight into Braverman’s central thesis, the engagements of the period with workers and the labour process (unlike Boggs and Romano’s work) also had the effect of obscuring moments of resistance and labour organizing. As a result, labour was often portrayed as the inert victim of capitalist organization in these accounts. Burawoy, for example, tells us “Where [Roy] had been interested in why workers did not work harder, I wondered why they worked as hard as they did (2001, 454).

During the 1980s, engaged research of workers by sociologists set off in a couple of directions. One set of theorists, believing Braverman and his descendants’ work had neglected both worker subjectivity and resistance in its examination of the labour process, began a project of remedying such shortcomings (Smith, Knights and Wilmott 1991, Knights and Willmott 1989, Willmott 1997, Knights and McCabe 2000). Within such research we can also place Paul Willis’ foundational text *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs* (1977), for which he spent time with twelve working class boys in the British Midlands and assessed their attitudes towards the school system and labour. These approaches, which had British cultural studies as a solid reference point, have brought to their research a desire to explore the agency of workers and proletarians rather than documenting the way they reacted to changes in the labour process or the wider social field.
A second direction of note is the research that was carried out in Canada by unions and other labour organizations for a brief period during the 1980s in order to study the impact of technological change on their members. Under the aegis of the Canadian Department of Labour and its Technology Impact Research Fund (TIRF), a number of these projects involved collaboration between unions and progressive academics, resulting in analyses such as the Canadian Auto Worker’s study of workplace restructuring (Robertson and Wareham 1987), studies of women in the garment industry and their responses to restructuring (Gannage 1995), and research exploring and the effects of office automation (Clement and Zeelechow 1987) and technological transformations in the telephone industry (Mosco and Zureik 1987) on workers.

3.3.2 The Worker Inquiry and Conricerca

These broadly sociological and predominantly Anglophone research projects have developed methods that are, to varying degrees, immanent, engaged, and in solidarity with those researched. Roughly paralleling the development of such methodologies is the autonomist workers’ inquiry, a tradition that, beyond its interest in immaterial labour, also offers a productive set of reflections on epistemology and method. In the remainder of this section I offer a brief history of the worker inquiry, beginning from its development and application by Italian workerist militants within factory settings during the 1950s and 1960s. These applications of the worker inquiry as imagined by Marx have been credited with producing counter-knowledges of the labour process, connections between militant workers and radical intellectuals, and new forms of rank and file solidarity.

Footnote 32: The history of the debates around worker inquiry in the early days of workerism has been recounted in much more detailed fashion elsewhere, including by its protagonists (Wright 2002, Borio et al, 2002 and the many interviews contained therein, Conti et al, 2007). My own, much more detailed history, continues on following pages.
organization. Like genealogy, feminist standpoints, and adaptations of Chicago school ethnography, the worker inquiry is not a flawless vehicle. Within its history I therefore discuss the tensions that have emerged as a result of pursuing such an immanent approach to labour research. The first emerges as a result of the fraught relationship between the worker inquiry and the discipline of sociology, which, as we have alluded to and will examine more closely, autonomists took many of their methods from. The second is the more recent division that has emerged between the worker inquiry and conricerca, or co-research, a mode of research that is posed by some as completely immanent. I end the section with some considerations on what it means to conduct worker inquiry today, under conditions of cognitive capitalism.

In 1966, Tronti opened his foundational workerist text, Operai e Capitale, by suggesting that the conditions in Italy were right for a “new spirit of adventurous discovery” with respect to revolutionary thought and action (2006, 8). By adopting an optimistic outlook, Tronti was certainly rowing against the current in a context where the country’s ruling class seemed to have comfortably established itself at the helm of Italian Fordism. Indeed after regular rounds of struggle in the decade after World War II, as southern Italian migrants flowed into industrial northern Italy in the early fifties, trade unions found themselves subject to unnerving defeats at the bargaining table at Fiat and across the industrial sector (Balestrini and Moroni 2003, 5-22, Wright 2002, 6-31). As the sixties opened, trade unions began to be viewed with suspicion even by their own members. The most emblematic example of this came in 1962, when thousands of workers converged on the headquarters of the Unione Italiana Lavoratori (UIL) in Turin’s Piazza
Incensed that the UIL had come to an agreement with FIAT against their wishes, workers turned the square into the scene of an extended riot that lasted over two days.

If visions of workers attacking their own union offices were hardly seen as examples of class unity from within the traditional vantage points of the Italian left, throughout the 1960s the Italian autonomists looked at the social landscape and famously saw what few others discerned – a new composition emerging among the Italian working class. In dispersed explosions such as that in Turin, autonomists saw the seeds of a new period of labour militancy against Italian Fordism. Potere Operaio, the key group animating Italian autonomist politics between 1967 and 1973, would later refer to Piazza Statuto as their “founding congress” (cited in Wright, 2002, 58).

Mario Tronti’s text is marked by this attempt to look at social relations in Italy from a different angle, to search for the subterranean stream of labour resistance rather than the rivers of the established labour movement that only 15 years later would be in crisis. As he suggested, referring to both forms of theory and labour organization, “what interests us is everything that has within it the power [forza] to grow and develop” (2006, 7). His book captures the epistemological spirit marking the time, one that would lead to the development of a “parallel sociology” in the service of worker inquiries (Diane Pinto, cited in Wright 2002, 21). Within the scenario he was facing in the mid-sixties, Tronti believed that the only way to understand the forms of organization incubating within the exploding ranks of Fordist factory workers was to adopt the epistemological position of being “within society and against it at the same time” (2006, 11). For Tronti and the other autonomists after him, beginning with an examination of the composition of labour, as Marx had aimed to do with his inquiry so long before, was the most effective way of creating a knowledge capable of wresting control of production away from
capital: “We too have seen capitalist development first, and worker’s struggle second. This is a mistake. We need to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start again, from the beginning: and that beginning is the class struggle of the working class” (Ibid, 87).

As we saw in Chapter 2, for Tronti and other workerists it was not only a matter of playing favourites in choosing where to begin their analyses. If the working class determined the movement of capital, and resistance determined the organization of power, any attempt to extinguish capitalism required an analysis of the working class, of its modes of struggle and organization. For Tronti this project required patient work “from within” (Ibid, 11) and a reinvention of Marxism, one that forced that tradition to measure up to the newly established context of Italian Fordism.

In this reinvention of Marxism, however, Tronti was wary of the encounter between revolutionary thought and academic forms of knowledge production, worrying that the “elegant forms of social science methodologies” would subsume the “practical content of worker research” (Ibid, 8). This concern references a debate that has been a recurrent feature within autonomist Marxist circles from the immediate postwar years until our day. For a return to Marx’s project of a workers’ inquiry involved, from the very beginning, decisions over what methods to use and a positioning of these methods vis-à-vis established academic disciplines. In the project of worker inquiry, therefore, sociology loomed large as a potential source of tools for producing knowledge about the world of work. Yet many operaisti, as Harry Braverman would do twenty years later, attacked the industrial sociology that was developing at the time in the United States as little more than a bourgeois science at the service of industry (Conti et al 2007, Wright 2002).
By the point Tronti published *Operai e Capitale*, however, the forms of research developing on the ground were increasingly making such distrust a moot point. Indeed as Steve Wright (2002, 22) has suggested, “what might loosely be termed an Italian radical sociology” had been developing since after the war in the work of figures such as Ernesto De Martino, Danilo Dolci, and Danilo Montaldi. In this early work of the 1950s, researchers collated the individual life stories of Italian workers and peasants, albeit within an approach that often saw the recording of these shared experiences as a form of literature rather than social science. This work of oral history became a key tributary of the project that would ensure the eventual encounter between sociological methods and collective organizing in the factory. The scattered inquiries into the composition of the Italian working class were soon bolstered by the arrival of examples of a “minor” sociology of labour from other countries, ones which were seized upon by a second generation of workerists that included Romano Alquati, Alessandro Pizzorno, and Montaldi (Borio et al 2007). The diary of Renault worker and militant Daniel Mothe from France, and Paul Romano and Ria Stone’s *The American Worker* (2005), from the United States (among others) became, for those who would develop some of the earliest articulations of a worker inquiry, compelling examples of the raw power contained within the first hand accounts of workers.

The first coherent elaboration of the worker inquiry as a project within autonomist Marxism would develop within the circle associated with the journal *Quaderni Rossi*, which ran between 1961 and 1965. As Steve Wright (2002) and Marta Malo de Molina (2004) have both pointed out, differences around the procedures and focus of the worker inquiry quickly arose within the editorial board. In the words of Damiano Palano:

a basic split emerged around the form and the goals of the survey from the formation of the first *Quaderni Rossi* group. On the one side there was the faction of “sociologists” (lead by Vittorio
Rieser), which was at that time the most numerous. This group saw the inquiry as a tool for producing knowledge of a transformed worker reality, and as oriented towards providing the stimulus for a theoretical and political renovation of the labour movement’s official institutions. On the other side, we find Alquati and a few others (Soave and Gasparotto), who, based on the factory experiences that were coming from the US and France, thought of the inquiry as the basis for a political intervention oriented towards organizing workers’ conflict. It was a considerable difference from the point of view of the concrete goals of inquiry, but the distance was even greater however in terms of method: in fact, while the first group was actualizing Marxist theory through the thematics and methods of North American industrial sociology, Alquati was proposing a kind of “strategic inversion” within the study of the factory, comparable in terms of importance with that proposed a few years later by Tronti with regards to the law of value (Palano, no date).

Raniero Panzieri, a central figure in the founding of Quaderni Rossi and the beginnings of a workerist epistemology, was on the former side of the split described by Palano. Panzieri made it a project to convince others of the utility of sociology, going so far as to polemically suggest, in 1965, that “bourgeois sociology has advanced to such a degree that the scientific level of its analysis is now superior to Marxism” (2007). For Panzieri, Marx’s own work was “sociological”, in that it “refuses to identify the working class with the movement of capital and claims that it is impossible to automatically trace a study of the working class back to the movement of capital. The working class requires a completely independent scientific treatment because it operates as a conflictual - hence capitalist - as well as an antagonistic - hence anti-capitalist - factor” (Ibid).

Panzieri was not suggesting that sociology was without its own problems, but that the group around Quaderni Rossi could “use sociology and criticize it for its limitations, just as Marx did with classical political economy” (Ibid, emphasis added). As Palano suggests, figures like Romano Alquati (who would become central to the development of conricerca) accused Panzieri
of confiding “more in traditional social ‘science’ than the project of developing a properly Marxian reconstruction of the critique of political economy” (cited in Wright 2002, 24).

Stepping aside from these controversies for a moment, it might be useful to examine what the worker inquiry actually involved in terms of its methodological choices. There was, as we have said, extensive use of the interview and the questionnaire in order to record the experiences of workers within a rapidly transforming factory setting. Whether or not individual workerists believed in sociological methods, there was also agreement over the fact that such research was to be based on mutual trust between researchers and workers. Equally present was a hope that the inquiries carried out would be able to generate forms of mutual aid. These would ideally leave workers with an expanded capacity to both reflect upon their conditions and organize resistance to them. As Wright suggests, “the registration of working-class behaviours had a vital part to play in fostering self-activity” (Ibid, 25). Panzieri suggested, in his words, that “not only is there no discrepancy, gap or contradiction between inquiry and the labour of building political relations; inquiry is also fundamental to such process. Moreover, the work needed for inquiry, the labour of theoretical discussion with comrades and workers, is one of serious political training, and inquiry is a great tool for this” (Ibid.).

Worker inquiry also developed through reading groups (often of Marx’s *Capital*) facilitated by Marxist intellectuals, an example of self-education which workers in some industrial settings even achieved as part of their collective agreements. If the thought of paying employees to read Marx kept Italian managers sleepless however, the links created between militants, students and intellectuals as a result of these inquiries were arguably even more dangerous. Pier Luigi Gasparotto suggests that the inquiries became “a considerable factor of activation, for older
organizers and young workers, an incredible producer of connections” (cited in Borio, Pozzi and Roggero, 2002, 15). As these connections were established between those carrying out inquiries and the workers, the operaisti who developed the most far-ranging understandings of what the worker inquiry was saw their roles as facilitating the production of new forms of collective organization within the factory.

The tradition, born with Alquati and others, of seeing the worker inquiry as leading to the autonomous organization of labour, has since become a prevalent one within autonomist thought. Along the way, there has developed a tenuous but arguably useful distinction between worker’s inquiry, which we can think of as the kind advocated by Panzieri, and conricerca, or co-research (Borio, Pozzi and Roggero 2002, Conti et al, 2007), which is an heir to the work of Alquati and others. In the most general terms, while in the worker inquiry an acknowledged difference exists between the researcher/s and the workers, conricerca proposes to completely eliminate this boundary: “Unlike co-research, workers’ inquiry was primarily cognitive and extemporaneous; it relied on an external agency for its development. On the contrary, the ambition of co-research is to try and do without this separation: the production of knowledge is immediately production of subjectivity and development of political organization (Conti et al, 2007).

Once again we have a stating of the two key qualities that are a part of the descriptions of immanent approaches we have examined thus far, although in this case they are being used as points that distinguish conricerca as a more fully immanent approach than the worker inquiry. The first point of distinction is that of research taking place fully within the processes it describes, rather than being the product of an “external agency.” The second is that there is a tangible result of such research, in the form of the “production of political organization.”
Before confronting this chapter’s final task of locating the inquiries carried out for this dissertation within the various debates we have examined, there is a further coordinate within them I would like to plot out. In a recent set of essays Antonio Negri (2003) makes some provocative claims regarding the role of inquiry (he uses worker inquiry and conricerca interchangeably) under conditions of cognitive capitalism. For Negri, who echoes the concerns of feminist standpoint theorists, “methodological thought has always assumed, in the past, a certain duality between the position of the observer and the object observed” (Ibid, 68). Negri is discussing what he terms methodological thought in two ways. The first is the pretense to objectivity of positivist social scientists, a pretense autonomist inquiries never had since they were very clearly positioned politically from the beginning. What Negri alludes to as a duality in the case of conricerca, however, are the relationships that developed between militant intellectuals and workers, two figures who were divided by culture, education, and of course factory walls. For Negri, this distinction has been transformed, so much so that the pressing contemporary question becomes one of considering the kind of research we might be able to construct “within the postmodern, within the total transformation of the panoramas of work and of social organization.” As eras change, he suggests, so must our epistemologies and methods. In a world where even agricultural and factory work is becoming saturated with information-handling activities, and where, therefore, “the whole labour process is becoming directed towards immaterial labour” (Ibid, 84), Negri suggests that “today it seems that there is no longer an outside” (Ibid, 68). Both the detached positions of social scientists and of militant intellectual vanguards become untenable. Indeed, to offer up once more the quote at the beginning of the section, “if method is an activity of knowing (as seems logical to admit), it must by now be a part of the mode of production, to be internal to it” (Ibid, 74).
For Negri, conducting inquiry under conditions of cognitive capitalism offers a very different set of problems than those faced by versions of inquiry carried out under Fordism. In a world where knowledge is increasingly the basis for the production and reproduction of profit, there is an ever-diminishing difference between “workers” and “intellectuals.” The new yardstick for measuring the effectiveness of research is to be found in the *product* of worker inquiry, which either generates knowledge that contributes towards the production of profit or produces forms of knowledge that disrupt it. Epistemologies and methods must change with history, and our new setting, in which there is virtually no activity that is “outside” to capital accumulation, requires a complete rethinking of what is involved in the act of research. Negri’s answer to this conundrum ends up sounding a great deal like that offered by the feminist standpoint theorists we have just discussed, namely that we need to begin from the body in our mappings of immaterial labour, to note how it is arrayed in networks, to examine the moments when command is imposed upon it in the form of interrupted or frustrated communication.

The concerns addressed by Negri, Borio and others are, of course, ones that have traversed the history of progressive, politically engaged thought, containing as they do questions of theory and practice, of knowledge and organization, of strategy and tactics. The worker inquiry and conricerca are certainly powerful tools for producing oppositional understandings of labour, including immaterial labour, in that they strive towards immanence and they act upon the world as they attempt to understand it. Nonetheless, as I have suggested, neither the worker inquiry nor co-research are perfect vehicles. Of relevance to the methodology developed for this dissertation are also the tensions evident from the very earliest autonomist attempts to develop a set of methods for probing the composition of labour. Rather than ignore these, it is useful to
acknowledge such difficulties in order to strategize around them. While the concerns voiced from Tronti all the way down the line to Conti et al are important, I would like to describe a methodological path for this dissertation that is somewhat less “pure” in the cleavages it presents between worker inquiry and sociology, and thus in the adoption of an immanent version of inquiry.

3.4 The Risky Business of Immanent Approaches

We have, so far, considered the concept of immanence at two different levels, the first ontological and the second epistemological/methodological. At a level of ontology, immanence is not a choice. If, as Spinoza and his interlocutors suggest, everything is formed out of substance, our position within it, no matter who we are or what we do, must be immanent. At a level of epistemology and method however, immanence is both a force at work in the world and a strategic choice we can make, a way of positioning ourselves with respect to knowledge, research and politics. The aforementioned origami figure cannot choose whether or not it is made up of the piece of paper, but when carrying out research into labour we can choose to do so as business process re-engineer consultants, company managers, engaged intellectuals, or union researchers. There are positions we can adopt in our inquiries, in other words, ranging along a spectrum from transcendent approaches (the manager with a stopwatch) to more immanent ones (the worker who keeps a diary, the trade unionist who writes a book). It is not by chance, therefore, that the first tensions we began to notice within adoptions of an immanent approach emerged at the level of epistemology.
As we saw in Foucault’s discussion of an immanent approach to knowledge production, while we may be able to uphold subjugated knowledges as valid, power differentials often appear between these knowledges and the “scholarly erudition” which validates them. In this way the development of an immanent epistemology can be frustrated by a pre-existent power differential that we must acknowledge. In the early work carried out on the development of a feminist standpoint theory, researchers may have been speaking from an immanent position (that of women), but tensions soon emerged between different locations within that position (white women and women of colour, queer women and straight women, etc) that created obvious ethical difficulties in making claims for everyone within that category. Within Anglophone sociological research, engagement with the world of labour (Anne Marion MacLean) did not necessarily mean the adoption of an ethical and politically productive stance (Whiting Williams). While Negri suggests that all research is immanent under conditions of cognitive capitalism, we should not, I hope, take this as meaning that these kinds of power differentials have disappeared within it. We can be “within” cognitive capitalism and be positioned differently, enjoying advantages others do not have. The first potential problem with pursuing immanent strategies in our research, therefore, comes when we do not recognize the forms of privilege we enjoy.

When we become aware of our privilege, espousing the complete disappearance of the division between the researcher and the researched becomes a risky business. Beyond this, adopting such a position becomes an ethical problem, and in the case of this dissertation, it would be ill advised. We may both be cognitive labourers, but my position as a scholar in a university setting irredeemably sets me apart from that of a call centre worker I interview who is struggling to make it to the end of the month. Thus, before we claim our research epistemology and methodology is completely immanent, we must ask ourselves who we are, and what our research examines. We
must gauge the power differentials between our own ability to speak and those who we are researching. This act not only shields us against kinds of intellectual vanguardism, in which we impose our own categories and strategies on a situation that is not of our making. It also forces us to *give up* something of ourselves as we enter a context, an act that, in Spinozist terms, allow us to *extend* the moment of struggle we are engaging with rather than take something from it. As we have seen, the history of engaged labour research is full of examples to keep in mind as a warning, but here it can suffice only to bring up Friederich Winslow Taylor’s outright theft and cancellation of the worker’s knowledge of the labour process in the transition to American Fordism.

While we should be wary of epistemologies and methods that promise us purity, there are nonetheless numerous excellent examples of the contemporary adoption of the inquiry and *conricerca*, of which I would like to mention two. The first is that carried out by the Spanish feminist collective *Precarías a la deriva* (2004, 157), which is described by its members as an “initiative between research and activism.” *Precarías* began their analysis of their own experiences of labour precarity and forms of immaterial labour ranging from academic to sex work with what they term a “picket-survey,” which involved communicating directly with women participating in a general strike in Spain. This strike was found to be problematic for reasons that included the unions’ failure to take up “domestic work and care, almost entirely done by women in the ‘non-productive’ sphere,” and “precarious, flexible, invisible or undervalued work.” Their subsequent work incorporated this process of recording women’s feelings regarding the strike, and has fed into activism surrounding precarious work and women’s disproportionately affected role within the phenomenon.
In a similar vein, members of the Kolinko activist collective carried out a superb inquiry into call centre work (2002), one they began by noting:

We neither want to organize Call Center-workers in union groups nor create new types of mediation. We are looking for the revolutionary tendencies, for worker's power and the desire for communism. We want to strengthen the forces of self-organizing and self-liberation. Therefore, we act collectively within this exploitation - some of us currently work in Call Centers - and propose this inquiry.

While, as they note, some members of the Kolinko collective worked in call centres, for the inquiry others took jobs in call centres “in order to meet people who work there” and gauge the kinds of composition and struggle occurring within them. Having carried out this research (and generated several moments of social struggle) on the digital assembly line, Kolinko published the results of their inquiry. This Hotlines inquiry offers an example of collaboration between people who are already in a community researching their own labour and those who are not, and one way a relationship of solidarity can be developed between the two.

There are many different forms militant research can take of course, and outside of projects such as those of Kolinko and the Precarias that are explicitly a part of the worker inquiry tradition, research driven by such intentions goes by a number of names. David Pellow and Lisa Sun-Hee Park, in their book on the toxic environmental and labour conditions in the Silicon Valley electronics industry, refer to their methodology as “advocacy” or “participatory” research (2002, 20-22). Susan Erem’s book Labour Pains: Inside America’s New Union Movement (2001) is another fine example of a participant’s situated analysis of day-to-day struggles within the union movement. Inquiries such as these have helped open up analyses of emergent forms of work to perspectives and experiences marginalized by the traditionally male and union-centric field of labour activism and research.
Despite their differences, these inquiries contain some important commonalities. While they are examples of immanent approaches to research, in every case the researchers are keenly aware of their own position as a key component of guiding the ethics of their research practices. Whatever this position may be, they are in abiding solidarity with the workers they research and organize with. They do not aim to bring “consciousness” to workers, but rather to develop an understanding of work rhythms and worker subjectivities in order to contribute to oppositional knowledges and feed into emergent forms of organization. These inquiries, among others, are inspirations for my own research into the organization of immaterial labour.

3.5 Setting the Scene for an Inquiry Into Immaterial Labour

As I elaborated the three worker inquiries at the heart of this dissertation I was haunted by a recurrent scene in an Elio Petri film of 1971, *La Classe Operaia va in Paradiso*. The protagonist of the film, played by Gian Maria Volontè, is Ludovico Massa, or Lulù, the prototypical Fordist factory worker who, despite his outwardly espoused communist inclinations, is reviled by his co-workers for his prodigious ability to add piecework rates to his base pay, a process which eventually sets higher production standards for everybody to live up to. Every day, as Lulù passes through the factory gates, he is assaulted by groups of trade unionists on one side and extraparliamentary groups on the other, both of whom shout at the workers (and each other) through megaphones and hand them flyers and broadsheets they are scarcely interested in. Lulù is, more often than not, annoyed at both parties and completely uninterested in the didactic literatures they produce, tired after his day at work and eager to get home and eat dinner or hear the latest soccer news. The scene became, for me, a powerful reminder of the dangers of
becoming so attached to a particular politic, epistemology, or method that we forget how to speak to people, to be sensitive to them, to respect their complex lives as humans as opposed to merely hoping they will be what we want, to fit them into our groups, theories and desires. Worse still, it illustrates the risks of believing that, despite evidence to the contrary, we are just like them, or that we even speak the same language.

Despite the risks that come with what I have called immanent labour inquiries, the research carried out in this dissertation is committed to immanence as an ethical and strategic approach to understanding immaterial labour. While I do not work in a call centre, in the telecommunications sector, or as a software designer, it is equally true that the paid labour I have performed for years has been of the immaterial variety (translating, proofreading, teaching, editing, researching, etc). I have long been interested in the growing nexus between labour and communication, mostly due to the fact that my own life involves repeated passages through this nexus every day. I also have a genuine interest in how collective organization is developing in these emergent professions, since I strongly believe that, wherever possible, the more control workers have over their own lives and labour the better off we all are. And while my own position is doubtless privileged, I have taken part, through this work, in years of organizing around free education and the self-organization of intellectual workers, struggles that have fed into my own work/research. Methodologically, therefore, this dissertation employs an approach that works within the bounds of an abiding solidarity with the groups of workers whose collective forms of organization are explored, and draws from a range of methodological approaches designed for modes of knowledge production able to bolster and participate in social change.
Nonetheless, if distinctions like those that are made between methodologies such as conricerca and worker inquiry hold, we need to position our research with respect to the traditions informing our projects. While inspired, for example, by some of the more progressive applications of participatory action research, the scope of my dissertation and my geographical distance from the communities I researched in the case studies that follow do not allow me to claim such a methodology as my own. During the course of my research I ensured numerous possibilities for workers to participate, but the formulation of the research problem and the initial design of the research, which in action research are participatory, were mine alone. The research carried out for this dissertation is thus much closer to a worker inquiry, since there are key divisions between my position and those involved in the cases I am examining.

This worker inquiry examines three cases of collective organization by knowledge workers because, like the autonomist theorists I have discussed above, I am also convinced that a furthering of struggles involves a study of struggle. Nonetheless, just as power relations do not disappear with the adoption of an immanent epistemology, capital does not disappear when we develop our inquiries by looking at the working class. While the analysis of resistance has obviously been a powerful epistemological position for autonomists, again we need to be cautious about adopting such a stance in an orthodox manner, or without asking questions of it. I would argue that, even for the autonomists, it has never been a matter of completely rejecting a gaze towards capital as a way of complementing our understanding of struggle. As Tronti suggested, “broad strategic anticipations of capitalist development are certainly necessary” (2006, 13). And while he makes these anticipations secondary, discussing them as “limit-concepts within which to fix the tendencies of the objective movement” (Ibid), there is obviously in his words an acknowledgement of the limits of a search for this particular kind of immanence. After all, how
do we understand the emergence of a new kind of worker within post-Fordism if we do not understand shifts toward the post-Fordist organization of work? How do we understand the new forms of collective organization emerging within immaterial labour if we do not understand the crisis of organized labour? Moreover, as autonomists such as Christian Marazzi (2002) and Paolo Virno (2002) have illustrated in their discussions of what they describe as the “socialism” of capital in its post-Fordist phase, it is even occasionally difficult to draw neat distinctions between labour and capital. If the worker is the person who has nothing to sell except for her labour power, is the tech worker who owns a small 401k part of labour or capital? Where does one end and the other begin? Indeed Tronti’s work, and that of other autonomists, is best, I would argue, when they strive towards, but demonstrate a healthy ambivalence regarding, the construction of an immanent method. In this respect we might occasionally be advised to remember Tronti’s words when he suggests that “the weapons for proletarian revolt have always been taken from the bosses arsenals” (2006, 14).

While each of the three case studies that follow is one of resistance and organization within the ranks of immaterial labour, I have taken care to offer a context for each. This has involved providing a description of the particular form informational capital has taken in each region, in other words a political-economic backdrop for each case study examined. The raw material for

33 It is also worth noting that, even with the autonomists, there is not an absolute rejection of validating other kinds of research beyond the most traditional methods (the questionnaire and the interview). Early inquiries, including the most recent kinds of co-research, corroborate the recordings of subjectivity with a broader set of data. Indeed, were it even desirable, such data (GDP, profit margins, how industries are regulated, ownership patterns, etc, international trends, currents of thought within management, etc) would be difficult to exclude.  
34 The same is true for those who would still write off sociology as a “bourgeois science.” While this, as Braverman suggested, may be partially true, this chapter has demonstrated how challenges (Footnote continues on following page)
these overviews was culled from hundreds of articles found in trade journals, daily newspapers, national statistics, magazines, industry analyses, policy reports, academic articles and books. In my choice of cases, I was most interested in examining examples that seemed to prefigure potential future organizational responses by digital workers to the difficulties posed by post-Fordist capital. The case studies, therefore, offer insights into three organizational models that are being and will be adopted by immaterial labour in the information age. I was also looking for cases where there was a strong and obvious link between the particular form taken by informatized capital and the type of organization adopted by immaterial labourers. Here I tended to focus on how forms of collective organization by workers were seizing on emergent qualities within informational capital (convergence, flexibility, mobility, etc), a methodological decision that is again informed by autonomist thought. The degree to which one can generalize from each case is subject to debate, since the examples chosen span two continents and three countries. In order to allow for some degree of comparison, I limited my choice of cases to workers in the telecommunications and information technology sectors, ones which are by this point undeniably global and subject to similar sets of processes. My hope was that common qualities emerging from such different scenarios would provide a basis for making cautious claims regarding emergent qualities of the composition of immaterial labour.

Finally, I also chose cases which by their very existence discounted proclamations by knowledge worker theorists of the harmony to come in digital capitalism. Certainly they were not hard to find – examples of the recomposition of immaterial labour are legion across the developed world. Ideologies of the information society regularly lionize those moments where corporate
to dominant forms of knowledge production can effectively operate both within and against, (Footnote continues on following page)
convergence creates “synergies” across media and telecommunications sectors from which management, workers, and customers will all benefit. In Canada, my research looks at the struggles against newly converged Atlantic regional telecommunications company Aliant by call-centre workers in Moncton, New Brunswick. In 2001 these workers certified a bargaining unit through the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers, a converged union rising to prominence in the wake of this converged telecommunications company. A good deal of the literature around knowledge work praises the new, enviably hip and well-remunerated jobs associated with the high tech sector. In the United States, my dissertation examines the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers (WashTech), an “open-source” union formed in 1998 by Microsoft contract employees in Redmond, Washington to combat what they refer to as their “permatemp” status. Finally, flexibility as a boon for both capital and workers is one of the most deafening clarion calls by proponents of the information society. In Italy, my research explores the case of the Collettivo PrecariAtesia collective of call-centre workers in Rome, who organized their own rank and file collective to deal with their extreme labour precarity. Their case offers an example of the choice to organize almost completely autonomously, or without the help of unions, as well as one in which workers developed flexible strikes and forms of digital sabotage for the information age.

My method is in the spirit of “grounded theory”, the classic inductive approach to generating sociological theory (and thus social knowledge) via an analysis of research results rather than a priori assumptions (Glaser and Strauss 1967). While wanting to caution against beliefs that we can somehow free ourselves of a priori assumptions (this can easily become the type of epistemology feminists understandably revolted against), there are similarities between such an
approach and the types of research carried out in the service of worker inquiry. Above all they are materialist, in the sense that they maintain knowledge arises from a specific material context. In the course of my research I traveled to each of the locations in question and carried out extensive interviews with workers involved in each case study. In all, this dissertation draws on 35 of such interviews, roughly spread out evenly between the three cases. In addition, I spent time with workers in all three settings, enjoying off-record conversations, discussing the role of my research, the state of struggles within their industry and elsewhere, comparing political strategies, and considering the strategies used by workers in the other cases I was examining. I attended political meetings with them, enjoyed social outings, spent time getting to know them. At times (and this is particularly the case in the Italian case study) friendships developed which made it very difficult to remember that I was, always, an “insider-outsider” of the privileged sort.

After having set up each case study, the central portion of each case study chapter recounts as faithfully as possible (to the workers’ experience) the struggle in question. Here I make heavy use of the interviews of the people who animated these moments of collective organization. I also draw on the aforementioned sources of data. In addition, I have done my best in each case to use the literature produced by the worker organizations in question, including union press releases, listservs, letters to members, flyers, zines, and websites.

Throughout this inquiry, given my position of being a privileged insider-outsider, I took my ethical responsibilities seriously. Participants were offered the possibility to not answer particular questions, strike certain comments from the record, or remain anonymous. I transcribed the results of each interview and returned them to each participant, drawing their attention in particular to the parts of their responses I wanted to include in the dissertation. To the
greatest extent possible, I tried to weave their own descriptions of their struggles into the chapter rather than to speak for them. When each chapter was completed I sent participants a draft copy and made revisions based on their suggestions. What has emerged from these methods is, I believe, three compelling examples of the labour organizing to come within digital capitalism.
Chapter 4
Revolt of the Microserfs: The Formation of WashTech

The character of the American economy during the twentieth century, wrote Regulation School theorist Michel Aglietta in the midst of post-Fordist restructuring, stood in an “exemplary” relationship to capitalist regulation as a whole (2000 [orig. 1976], 23). The 1970s was a time of a change, transformation, emergences, and those taking place in America could be used as a guide, according to the French economist, for the new tendencies at work within global capital. As if to illustrate this, as Aglietta finished his study of capitalist dynamics, a young Bill Gates was in the process of founding Microsoft. Thus began the trek towards the development of a proprietary operating system that would turn his company into one of post-Fordism’s most iconic organizations. Not only would Microsoft workers produce one of the era’s most important commodities – software – but, as we shall see, its management would come to adopt the labour-force engineering techniques and company organizational structure that have marked our political and economic times. It is fitting, therefore, that the United States and Microsoft should provide this dissertation with its first glimpse of the subjectivities animating the struggles of 21st century immaterial labour: a case of collective organizing in the high-tech sector by software workers, or “permatemps”, as they came to call themselves.

35 This chapter is an adapted version of a previously published article: Brophy, Enda. 2006. “System error: Labour precarity and collective organizing at Microsoft.” Canadian Journal of Communication, 31(3): 619-638.
During the 1990s, stories abounded within American news media of young high-tech employees making millions in the New Economy on the strength of their creativity and entrepreneurial flair. These news items became a natural vehicle for liberal-democratic narratives of a highly rewarded and peaceful knowledge worker class becoming the engine of informational capitalism. This chapter cuts through such visions by offering a different portrait of the labour relations marking the much-hyped high-tech sector from the beginning of the 1990s. The chapter begins by offering a political economic context for the case study, examining the broad-based restructuring of labour in the United States since the 1970s and the growing yet increasingly precarious position of high-tech work within this general transformation. It then examines the case of the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers (WashTech) as one of the earliest and most significant examples of collective organizing by these workers. This is achieved by first offering an account of the tensions within Microsoft that led to the formation of WashTech, tensions that resulted almost exclusively as a result of the company’s imposition of permanent labour insecurity on almost a third of its Seattle-area workers through its intentional misclassification of them as temporary employees. The chapter then describes the rather unique structure and function of the resulting union before delving more deeply into the experiences of the WashTech members and organizers as they reflect on the kinds of labour they perform, the generalized insecurity that marks it, and the politics of labour in the high tech industry. It concludes by discussing the contradictory subjectivities animating the high-tech industry, considering some of the difficulties that stem from this for labour organizers and offering some preliminary notes on the insights provided by the case study.
4.1 Political-Economic Restructuring and High-Tech Labour in the United States

The broad and dramatic changes in the composition of the American labour force that have transpired since Aglietta completed his book are perhaps less a matter of empirical debate these days than one of staking out a political position with respect to them. In this section I offer the general contours of these changes so that we may better appreciate the specific conditions and experiences of the workers animating this case study.

Amid the steady automation and offshoring of manufacturing work since the 1970s, the American economy has produced at least a generation of workers who are far more likely to enter service-sector positions than to join their parents on the assembly line. These positions are characterized by a degree of precarity from which manufacturing workers were frequently shielded (Rosenberg and Lapidus 1999). What is perhaps surprising is that the pace of this change does not appear to be abating: A recent estimate suggests that since 2000 the nation has lost three million manufacturing jobs, one-sixth of its total (Greenhouse 2006). Newer occupations have replaced a portion of the manufacturing positions lost to post-Fordist restructuring. Growing alongside the informatization necessary to achieve forms of flexible, just-in-time production, a host of immaterial labour positions, including knowledge worker jobs (ranging from call centre work, to web-design, to the high-tech software production work at the heart of this chapter), have increasingly become potential sources of employment for US workers.

Yet if manufacturing positions have fallen and immaterial labour has grown in the United States, it is equally true that one must distinguish between occupations in the latter category given
its breadth. One must also consider the widely documented bifurcation occurring within immaterial labour in terms of status, skill and pay - social divisions which overlap documented gender and racial inequities (Burris 1998, Henwood 2003, Martin 2002). In other words, rather than conflating forms of work as different as software testing and service sector employment, it is useful to get a sense of the predominance of the specific kind of occupations out of which the collective organizing examined in this chapter emerged, in order to appreciate their position within the country’s changing workforce. Here, while remaining mindful of the fact that attempts to determine the exact number of “knowledge workers” in the United States have a controversial history, it is nonetheless possible to come to rough but useful figures.

Employment estimates in the United States for the range of upper-tier occupational definitions within which the knowledge workers in this case study fall vary from the roughly 1.7 million listed by the US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (United States Department of Labor 2006)\(^{36}\) to the more recent figure of 2.85 million offered by the American Electronics Association (cited in Connors and Jones 2005).\(^{37}\) Considered numerically therefore, this group of workers is a consistent one for the US economy as a whole. Reflecting its position as upper-tier

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\(^{36}\) These figures were arrived at by totaling the numbers of four occupational definitions (Computer Programmers, Computer Software Engineers, Applications, Computer Software Engineers, Systems Software, and Computer Systems Analysts) offered by the BLS. These figures ought to be treated with some caution however. One example of why this is warranted came when I asked one of the WashTech interviewees to identify himself and some of his Microsoft colleagues within one of these descriptions and he had great difficulty doing so (Denys Howard, personal email, 2005).

\(^{37}\) This figure, like the one cited from the BLS, refers to occupational categories rather than employment by sector. The latter, which includes manual occupations within the high-tech sector, is estimated by the AEA in its Cyberstates study to be 5.6 million (cited in Connors and Jones 2005).
informational labour, high-tech work is characteristically white and male (Martin 2002, Henwood 2003, de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2008).

Considering the differences in social prestige, skill, and compensation between the labour of a computer programmer and that of a fast food employee, liberal-democratic predictions of a happy workforce would seem to make the most sense for the former category. Yet the analysis of such upper-tier forms of high-tech work suggests that not only has the labour of the web-designer or the software tester become paradigmatic in the knowledge economy, but the kinds of employment arrangements they experience are increasingly precarious. As a recent Occupational Outlook handbook produced by the U.S. Department of Labor suggested, many "computer programmers" and an increasing number of "computer software engineers" and "computer systems analysts" are employed on a “temporary or contract basis” (United States Department of Labor, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). For a portion of these workers the flexible nature of their labour relationship with employers creates idyllic work conditions: rewarding, creative, and in steady supply. Yet in a country where by some estimates temporary jobs now make up a quarter of the nation’s work positions and are in any case growing as a percentage of total employment (Rosenberg and Lapidus 1999, Swoboda 2000), high-tech immaterial labour can also provide few or no benefits, be guaranteed only for a period measured in days or weeks, and live under the constant shadow of outsourcing.

The structural changes in the US economy have, over the past few decades, seen the established labour movement struggle to maintain the relatively small percentage of workers it represents (estimated at 7.8% in the private sector and 13% overall, [Maher 2006]). Any growth that has occurred in the union movement has thus predictably come from service sector-based unions such
as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which now collectively represent more workers than the unions representing manufacturing workers (Greenhouse 2006). The challenge for established labour, it follows, is to enter sectors of the economy that are growing.

It is this logic that led to the Communications Workers of America (CWA) to recognize high-tech, particularly during the New Economy bubble of the 1990s, as a potential source of membership growth. The CWA is made up of over 700,000 workers across the communications and media industries and was officially formed in 1947, although its roots stretch back to the company unions that were fostered within AT & T during the twenties and thirties (McKercher 2002). Since the break-up of the Bell monopoly in 1984, the union has excelled at expanding beyond the steadily eroding boundaries of its traditional base of telephone workers to include call centre workers, software designers, and journalists (Batt, Katz and Keefe 2003). Yet while the CWA has certainly been instrumental in the foundation of WashTech, the specific history of the union’s formation is best confronted immanently, by beginning in the offices of Microsoft’s Redmond, Washington campus.

4.2 Revolt of the Microserfs

If the manufacturing workers who fueled Fordism are being (at least partially) replaced by workers performing a range of immaterial labour, high-tech might be one of the last places one would expect to find the types of insubordination that characterized factory workers. Indeed work in the high-tech and new media sectors has, perhaps more than any other, been celebrated in liberal-democratic and industry approaches as a form of “play” (Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de
Peuter 2003, Ross 2004), with workers often depicted as playing a constituent role in the formation of a capitalism that, to paraphrase Google’s company mantra, is free of “evil.” A glance through news databases however reveals that the high-tech sector has emitted, here and there, the unmistakably acrid smell of smoke amidst workforce restructuring, eighty-hour workweeks and savage rounds of offshore outsourcing. While certainly a far cry from the militancy of Fordist factory labour, flare-ups have emerged in the American high-tech workplace that point to growing disaffection within portions of the industry’s workforce. Organizing drives have hit iconic companies such as Amazon.com and IBM in the last ten years, and, more generally, a small, disconnected, but vibrant culture of disenchantment appears to be emerging from the North American industry’s allegedly coddled knowledge workers, as books, websites and discussion boards have increasingly documented the frequently exploitative labour conditions marking life within it (Baldwin and Lessard, 2000, 2003, de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2005). This disenchantment has spurred the formation of tentative new American labour associations (WashTech and Alliance@IBM) that have added themselves to those emerging elsewhere in the world (including the Australian IT Worker’s Alliance and the IT Professionals Forums in India).

During the 1990s such disaffection boiled over at Microsoft. The company’s 30-year lifespan, despite some recent setbacks, has seen it consolidated as one of America’s best known corporations and a monopolist in the market for that most immaterial of goods, software. Microsoft’s total assets, as of 2005, exceeded seventy billion dollars US (Microsoft 2005). Yet despite beliefs to the contrary, not all of its employees became “Microsoft millionaires” during the company’s heady rise to the domination of the market. The workers Douglas Coupland

38 Among the numerous news articles covering symptoms of unrest within the high-tech sector (Footnote continues on following page)
immortalized in his novel *Microserfs* (1995) as a placid army of depoliticized puzzle-solvers, who revered their boss and overcame their existential boredom through listless consumption in their free time, began to organize. While the struggles were by no means widespread within the company, the conditions for this conflict were set by a combination of the processes investing contemporary immaterial labour: the flexible management of the workforce (or the imposition of precarity), and the (closely related) application of offshore outsourcing techniques to the once-sheltered set of occupations involved in the production of software.

During the nineties Microsoft took decisive steps towards imposing flexible management on its much-expanded workforce according to a model that included a core/permanent group of workers and a peripheral/precarious one. By 2000, roughly a third of over 19,000 tech-workers at the company’s Puget Sound operations were contract workers (or “agency contractors”) employed by third-party temporary employment agencies such as Sakson and Taylor Onsite, Rho, Wasser, Manpower, and others (Ervin 1999a). This condition was either very short-lived or renewed indefinitely, leading in the latter case to the emergence of the term “permatemp” as a descriptor for those enduring the permanently insecure life it produced. Nor was the condition unique to Microsoft workers: industry estimates suggested that in 1998, the year of WashTech’s formation, over 13,000 of Washington state’s software industry’s almost 60,000 employees were contractors (Fraone 1999).

hopefuls usually involved being interviewed by Microsoft managers, hired by them, and then told to sign on to a temp agency’s payroll. The agency contractors, while physically working at Microsoft, were therefore formally employees of the temp agency. Once on the job, agency contractors lacked the security and benefits that the permanent employees they worked next to enjoyed. As Marcus Courtney, co-founder and president of WashTech described, “you had no healthcare, you had no paid vacation, you had no sick leave, you were constantly worried that your manager could for whatever reason one day just eliminate your job, and you found out that contracting could be a mark against you for a full-time job” (Marcus Courtney interview).

Aggravating this vulnerability were the multiple forms of exclusion Microsoft enforced in order to create a barrier between permatemps and full-timers. In June of 1998 the company instituted a mandatory 31-day break after every 12 months of contract work for temps (Rothenburger 1999). Forced to wear orange coloured badges (as opposed to the blue ones worn by full-timers), kept away from company “morale events” such as the ship parties that accompanied the launch of a new product they had been an integral part of creating, off company sports fields and out of company stores, according to Barbara Judd a “permatemp culture” (cited in Ervin 1999a) of the excluded and the hyper-exploited emerged among contractors. The appearance of such a culture was scarcely surprising, considering that Microsoft executives such as Greg Maffei publicly suggested these workers did not measure up to the full-timers in terms of performance (Greene 1999). “We’ve set a hard rule” he said, laying bare the manner in which some at the company felt, “364 days and these people are out. I don’t care if they’re rebuilding Windows 2000 by themselves, they are not going to work in this company” (cited in Ibid).
The permatemps rebelled against this in two key ways. The first, a legal offensive conceived of long before WashTech, was to launch what became a highly publicized class-action lawsuit against Microsoft in 1992, suing to recover the benefits that had been denied to them due to their misclassification as temporary workers. In Vizcaino vs. Microsoft Corp, over 8,500 workers eventually won a $97 million settlement from the company in 2000.39

The second was the formation of WashTech. As ferment grew at Microsoft, disparate contractors connected through the King County Labor Council. The nascent group, with the aid of the National Writers Union and the CWA, formed the Coordinating Committee for High-Tech Labour Issues in order to explore the question of “what high tech organizing would look like in Seattle” (Marcus Courtney interview). Then, in the winter of 1998 the Washington State Department of Labour and Industries helped the permatemps’ cause by passing legislation limiting overtime pay for high-tech workers at the behest of the high-tech industry. The rule change generated an outburst of anger on the part of high-tech workers and provided fertile ground upon which to expand the base for collective organization, as the organizing group managed to obtain the email addresses of people who had protested the legislation. Early stated goals of the contractors included the establishment of a statewide voice for high-tech workers,

39 As it turned out, Microsoft had been keeping files on these permatemps, a fact that suggested the company viewed them as something more than a stopgap measure to deal with the odd production cycle (Richman 1999). 8,000 plaintiffs received their payout in October of 2005. Cheques ranged from a low of $115 dollars to $51,000 (US). Around 8,000 plaintiffs received their payout in October of 2005. Founding WashTech member Mike Blain has suggested along with others that the lawsuit, once the settlement was announced, actually hindered WashTech’s organizing efforts: “It helped keep fence sitters on the fence. Who needs a union, who needs a collective voice at work, when you're just waiting for a big, fat class-action settlement?” (cited in Nachtigal 2005a).
making sick pay, holiday pay and medical coverage part of employment contracts, and challenging restrictions that prevented temps from changing agencies (Fryer 1998).

Events heated up through the early months of 1998. Frustrated by the conditions mentioned above, as well as by the fact that there was no way to find out what Microsoft was actually paying their temp agency per hour for them, 18 Microsoft workers producing a financial accounting program called TaxSaver declared themselves to be a collective “negotiating unit” in June (van Jaarsveld 2004). The employees, who included certified public accountants, attorneys, and certified financial managers, sought to negotiate with the four staffing agencies that represented them. “Everyone wants us in terms of a profit center. No one wants to take responsibility for our issues,” suggested Barbara Judd, one of the 18 (cited in Ervin 1999a).

4.3 WashTech’s Structure

During initial meetings with their labour allies the permatemps quickly realized that a traditional approach to collective organizing would not work in their situation. As Courtney points out, American labour law and Microsoft’s reliance on temporary employment agencies was enough to ensure this: “We had to explain to them, in groups you could have forty different temp agencies with a hundred different workers… they explained the election process, and there was just no way that could ever make any sense… The legal framework is a very narrow box for unions to organize in” (Marcus Courtney interview).

Indeed more than 50 firms served Microsoft, often providing workers through their own subcontractors. A single permatemp could have up to five or six “employers,” making it almost
impossible to even identify a bargaining unit (Fitzgerald 1999). Moreover, according to labour law at the time all parties had to agree to bargain, something the temp agencies promptly refused to do in the case of the TaxSaver rebellion. As a result of such legal barriers, the workers adopted an experimental form for the new organization, a version of what Richard B. Freeman and Joel Rogers have called “open-source” unionism (2002). For Freeman and Rogers, open-source unionism is a form of collective organizing that goes beyond the traditional workplace, bringing in “nontraditional” members from settings where there is not necessarily majority union support. These could include unemployed workers, or allies employed in other companies or even other industries.

In the wake of the TaxSaver unrest, the CWA made an affiliation proposal to the nascent group, which was subsequently voted upon and approved by the permatemps. In the process, the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers, as they called themselves, became local 37083 of the CWA. It is worth pointing out that the decision to affiliate was a strongly contested one given the stance taken by established labour unions around the time the legislation banning overtime was passed. In a stunning lack of labour solidarity, the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers and the Seattle Professional Engineering Employees Association had supported the measure banning overtime for tech workers, as it was not applicable to their own unionized employees.

Marcus Courtney describes both the contested nature of the affiliation vote and the autonomy marking Washtech’s formation:

[The trade union support for the measure] was definitely an issue. But I think what ultimately happened was, it was a very
close vote, as all these votes go, but what ultimately pushed the pushed the committee for affiliating… it wasn’t like we started organizing and somehow we got support from an international union. We came out without any backing from an international union saying we’re going to form a union. That is unheard of in the late twentieth century that you’d actually have a group of workers at the world’s most powerful corporation saying we’re going to form a union and there was nobody from an international union at that point supporting it. I mean that’s pretty remarkable (Marcus Courtney interview).

Despite the opposition to what some saw as the self-serving interests of established labour unions therefore, the affiliation proposal was accepted. The structure of the new organization was to be very different from that of standard trade unions however.

First of all, due to the fact that there simply were not the numbers to certify a bargaining unit at Microsoft or many other companies in the industry, membership in WashTech was made open to anybody working in the tech sector (and remains so to this day). In this way individual members who join can operate as seeds within Microsoft or other companies, theoretically acting as the forward edge of a movement to organize high-tech. Crucially, this structure allows people to retain their membership in WashTech across volatile employment periods and regardless of the company they work for. In addition, although technically a local, WashTech appears to enjoy a good deal of operational autonomy from the CWA, which nonetheless supports it both financially and logistically. WashTech operates, therefore, as a kind of union within a union. The relationship between the two entities is currently harmonious, though the manner in which this plays out in the future remains to be seen.

What is certain is that collective action Courtney describes as a “contractor revolt” (Ibid) got results. The appearance of the union, paired with the ongoing Vizcaino suit, forced Microsoft to
pursue a different strategy in its workforce engineering. Despite the fact that management could hire and lay off temporary employees as it saw fit, the formation of WashTech crucially brought to light the employer’s *structural dependence* on these workers, workers that were now doing the unthinkable and organizing. As Courtney suggests, after a WashTech rally outside a Microsoft cafeteria in support of their TaxSaver colleagues: “I think that the moment management realized… if they kept pushing on this temporary thing, at that point there were so many contractors you could shut down the entire company! Contractors were so integral to every piece of production, they couldn’t do it without contractors!” (Ibid.)

Indeed it was clear that Microsoft’s “friction-free” flexible labour structure had created new vulnerabilities for the company – the temps were “ripe for unionization,” as Microsoft executives suggested in a leaked internal memo (cited in Bernstein 1999). In April 1999 the company instituted improved benefits and began to allow workers to choose among competing agencies (Ervin 1999b), and the same year it opted to lessen its dependence on contractors by hiring many of them on permanently (Greene 1999b).

Management also found new ways to both avoid further lawsuits and retain labour flexibility however. In 2000 it instituted a 100-day break in service for every year on the job the permatemps worked, a move that has been exceptionally disruptive for temporary employees, as we shall see below. Finally, after announcing a partnership with H&R Block in March of the same year, the TaxSaver unit was eliminated entirely (Andrews 2000). Microsoft had been forced to reformulate its strategy with respect to its temps, but at a steep price.
Eight years later, WashTech carries out a number of different functions. In addition to its growing efforts at a legislative level, which have primarily been aimed at curbing offshore outsourcing and limiting the number of tech workers allowed into the country on temporary (H1-B) work visas, the organization has been carrying out traditional union drives on a smaller scale at a handful of companies in the Puget Sound area. More recently, the union organized almost 1000 call center workers at a Cingular office in Bothell, Washington (Nachtigal 2005b). The drive was an important injection of financial autonomy for WashTech, whose dues-paying membership had not climbed above around 450 since its formation. Since its formation most members have consisted of temporary or unemployed technical support and tech writers working at Microsoft (Barbara Rader interview), although they have committed members working at many other companies across Seattle.

Beyond traditional organizing, WashTech is, as Spanish feminist collective Precarias a la Deriva have suggested was a solution to their own needs, a network “to break solitude” (2004, 157). Interviewees regularly brought up the frequently dispersed nature of tech work, to which WashTech was seen as an antidote. “There isn’t much communication,” says Microsoft tester David Larsen, “I mean there isn’t anything really stopping that, there’s just no time for it at work, and there isn’t much getting together, especially between temp workers and full-time workers. Full-time workers have their morale events they go to, and the temp worker stays in the office and works” (David Larsen interview). WashTech offers a space therefore where those who need it can share their frustrations and organize to address them. Denys Howard, a programmer writer at

40 Their first attempt, at computer product and maintenance company DecisionOne, failed when the employees withdrew their bid to unionize after heavy pressure from management (Rosa 1999).
Microsoft sees his dues as “going towards whatever contacts are possible throughout the sector here in the Seattle area. If we can get a contract at some smaller place, that helps us build towards… some future where the Microsoft workers don’t all think they’re above unions” (Denys Howard interview).

In a world where immaterial labour relies on fresh inputs of new skills in order to “keep up” with the technology employed in their industry (Kotamrajju 2002), WashTech has an ongoing training component for its members as well. This began with JavaScript training classes at the King County Labor Temple in Seattle and continues today with numerous courses. Most recently, WashTech has found a good deal of currency on the offshore outsourcing issue, one which brought the union to the media forefront in 2004 as outsourcing became an issue in the American presidential elections. The union has become an expert source on offshore outsourcing, a position it has used to pummel away at corporations exporting tech jobs to countries such as India and China.

4.4 Experiences of Labour, Experiences of Precarity

I never decided “Some day, when I grow up, I’m going to be a temp worker…” This was all imposed from above. They tell you what you are. (David Larsen Interview)

The Communication Workers of America is hoping that a convergence of immaterial labour will accompany that of ownership and technological platforms in the information and communication industries. Its support of the WashTech venture represents a bet that those Peter Drucker referred to half a century ago as “knowledge workers” have more affinities than differences, and that these might lead to the creation of labour solidarity across the growing
sector. For CWA President Larry Cohen, whether it is journalists at Knight Ridder or the army of software workers at Microsoft, “[t]he people we’re talking about are writers. Either they’re writing code or they are editing text, but they’re all writers” (cited in Fitzgerald 1999). As suggested in Chapter 3, for both academic analyses and labour organizing, such theories require engagement with their (frequently silent) protagonists.

Archival material and the interviews conducted for this case study suggest that while experiences of WashTech members and organizers are predictably varied, they nonetheless find some common denominators concerning the nature of, and processes characterizing, their work in high-tech. For Marcus Courtney, education and income levels are a key factor of difference between the manufacturing workers traditionally associated with Fordism and the temporary workers WashTech represents (Marcus Courtney interview). Interviewees had a range of labour experience in the service sector, and some had worked in factories or the agricultural sector for a time. Nonetheless, most believed not only that the kind of work they did now was considerably different than manufacturing, but that this difference was common to a range of occupations across the information and communication industries. For Cingular campaign lead organizer Karen Estevenin this similarity in their experiences of labour was fundamental to WashTech’s drive to organize communication workers across increasingly tenuous industry subdivisions: “We’re organizing people in telecommunications, and people doing wireless, and call centre workers, and high-tech workers. When people get together and sit down in a room and start talking about their issues, they’re all the same. People can find more similarities than not” (Karen Estevenin interview).
In WashTech members’ accounts the term “professional” often acted as shorthand in order to differentiate their work from manufacturing, a domain in which high-tech work were not seen to fit. Here an interesting series of tensions came to light. The first was between the high social status and financially rewarding positions of professionals such as (most) doctors and lawyers, and the unstable, hyper-exploited position of high-tech professionals. This tension manifested itself in the workers’ discussion of attitudes in the high-tech sector towards collective organizing via the instrument of the trade union, ones in which the familiar liberal-democratic narrative examined in Chapters 1 and 2 is clearly present. Brian Globerman’s summed up the feelings several of the interviewees suggested were prevalent in high-tech when he admitted that, despite being an active part of the anti-war movement in the seventies, “I also saw myself as a technologist, and as a professional, and unions were for trades” (Brian Globerman interview). For interviewees the political turnaround had inevitably occurred when this belief ran up against the precarity and exploitative nature of their labour conditions and the subsequent realization that they may have more in common with other working class professions than they had expected.

This fact was further exacerbated by popular expectations that they were wealthy due to their employment in the high-tech industry:

I mean I think that the problem too, as I saw it in 1998, was that people probably believed that everybody in the software industry was earning over a hundred thousand dollars a year. So for example then, and I continue now, to struggle on a paycheck-by-paycheck basis. So… if I try to ask my landlord for a bit of slack he said, you know, ‘I don’t understand, you’re probably earning a lot of money.’ And I just became aware that it’s not that way (Ibid).

Asked to reflect on the similarities and differences between their labour process and that of manufacturing workers, most interviewees suggested that the high-tech labour process differs
significantly from the assembly line. David Larsen, speaking of Microsoft’s globalized workflow, points out how he is “not rigidly tied to the guy working next to me. The guy that I’m working with might be in another country for crying out loud! He’s done and he’s in bed now, and then I pick it up and see what’s happened in the morning” (David Larsen interview). Beyond the collaborative aspect of their labour, for many the job also requires a different understanding of work, one in which a culture of tinkering and autonomy are predominant. Barbara Rader, whose children now work in the high-tech industry, says these workers are “in love with fiddling around with a computer. [They are] largely self-taught on an awful lot of things, self-motivated, and have very individualized skills” (Barbara Rader interview).

While the degree to which their work was supervised varied widely, most interviewees reported some degree of independence on the job, with little monitoring of their progress during the completion of a task. Many, like Brian Globerman, worked in teams: “…we were pretty much on our own in a test lab environment. [The supervisor would] probably see us a couple of times a day, I had a team meeting once a week or so” (Brian Globerman interview). Others, like programmer writer Denys Howard, described more solitary work, in which a range of different tasks were performed under the auspices of a broader project:

In the job I have right now I work pretty much alone. It’s a fairly small group I’m working for right now. There’s one technical writer, and she’s my lead. So she ‘supervises’ me. But basically that means that she makes sure that I understand what my tasks are at any given time. This has been a six-month contract and at different times I’ve worked on different things, and she’s the one who manages all that. When I’m actually working it’s basically me. I work from what we call braindump information from the developers – they just write down a whole bunch of stuff and I try and translate it into English. And so I sometimes work with developers. I set up an interview with a developer to clarify a particular thing that I’m writing about that I don’t completely understand. I work basically alone, although
as is very typical these days at Microsoft I share an office (Denys Howard interview).

For others however, high-tech labour has been steadily routinized over the years as the industry has matured. WashTech Treasurer Margaret Bartley points out that the kinds of work within it have become more deskillled, segregated into hierarchies and, as she says, forms of “intellectual factory work.”

The high-tech industry has changed, because it went from, in a very rapid period of time, in one person’s career, where people who were working on computers at the beginning were researchers and almost like scientists. And then it became an academic field, where you could actually get a degree in computer science. And then it became more and more routinized, to where it just became technicians, and you just got trained in doing computer programming… Now people are trained quickly… they’re brought on and they’re expected to hit the ground running. They’ll get maybe a few days of training, and then they’re replaced with new people as the environment changes (Margaret Bartley interview).

Indeed while suggesting that the labour process within software production was becoming more routinized and thus similar in some ways to factory work, one of the qualities Globerman proposed as marking the difference between the two types of employment was, ironically, the ability to rebound from the loss of a job: “So when [an auto worker’s] job disappears they may be at more of a disadvantage than say an information worker” (Brian Globerman interview). This comment underscores the fact that peripheral information workers in the software industry must increasingly become adept at navigating intermittent employment due to the inherently volatile nature of high-tech.

This volatility was confirmed by all of the interviewees. For some temporary employment offers advantages in particular situations: “I go back and forth [between temporary and permanent employment], and the grass is always greener on the other side,” says Denys Howard
(Denys Howard interview). For most permatemps at Microsoft however, given the choice between temporary and full-time employment there was little hesitation. For former temp Michael Schramm “there was never any doubt. I did want to be an FTE [full-time employee]; I was only contracting because I had to. Others told me contracting gave them more flexibility. But I had a mortgage, so I wasn’t going to Europe. I just needed security” (cited in Nachtigal 2005a).

This precarity, because of Microsoft’s changes to its employment policy, persists to this day. For many, the condition is marked by an endless series of contracts, punctuated by Microsoft’s enforced 100-day periods of unemployed downtime. Larsen made this painfully clear:

[I]t’s this kind of silly cycle of coming onto the scene, ramping up, getting proficient, and as soon as you’ve really got it down, and you know what you’re doing, you’re gone. You’re paying off debts, paying off debts, catching up, catching up, maybe saving a little… and then you’re unemployed, and you start going into debt again (David Larsen interview).

Such policies also mean that workers switch between Microsoft and other employers on a regular basis. Brian Globerman’s month-to-month situation was typical of those I spoke to: “My contract ended on June 30th, so basically I’m doing some work for WashTech this week. I start a job at another company next Monday” (Brian Globerman interview). The constant change in jobs can have advantages, including new challenges, less chance of boredom and a set limit of hours worked per week. But for many the material insecurities that accompanied it and the regular salesmanship of oneself involved in staying in the game made for a far less preferable option.

“[Y]ou’re constantly having to pitch yourself. Every three to six months you’re going on another round of interviews… it gets wearing after a while” said Denys Howard (Ibid).
4.5 Organizing Immaterial Labour in the Thick of Precarity

The mobilization of affect, communication skills, and problem-solving capabilities required by the high-tech work those involved in WashTech carry out is an asset to their ongoing project of collective organizing in the high-tech industry. As Barbara Judd pointed out in the thick of the rebellion of the 18-member TaxSaver unit at Microsoft, “it’s ironic that the things that make us good workers and good in our jobs are the same things that make us good at forming a union” (cited in Ervin 1999a). Yet collective organizing amidst precarity is not easy, as WashTech’s slow growth in the high-tech industry demonstrates. Next I discuss the main barriers to the growth and effectiveness of WashTech, ones that appear to be generalizable within the high-tech industry.

4.5.1 Worker Subjectivity

As Laurie Milton has suggested from a different perspective (2003), only paying attention to the often difficult labour conditions of high-tech workers will guarantee that one’s discussion of their propensity to organize is insufficient. Issues of subjectivity are key to any discussion of immaterial labour, and therefore to evaluating some of the greatest problems faced by those who believe the high-tech offices of the New Economy ought to be union territory. In this dissertation I use the term subjectivity in a primarily Foucaultian sense. That is, I understand subjectivity as the effect of power relations, the material-discursive bounds within which one acts in the world.41

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41 As Foucault suggests, “There are two meanings of the word ‘subject’: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to” (2002, 331). Therefore, (Footnote continues on following page)
Subjectivity is important for the purposes of this inquiry because high-tech workers, despite the
culture of disenchantment we have been exploring, for the most part still eschew collective
organizing.

The first reason for this is that among many US high-tech workers there is, at best, an absence
of what we could call a memory of labour organizing to draw upon in order to confront the
exploitative relations they face. As Karen Estevenin explained about most of her former
colleagues in high-tech, “…they didn’t have any union experience. No one really knew what a
union was, except for maybe what they see in the movies and they thought that unions were for
factory workers and farm workers” (Karen Estevenin interview). Indeed the chain linking one
industrial struggle to another, the “circulation of struggles” as the autonomists call it, appears in
many cases to have been broken before it could arrive at high-tech workers. This culture is
bolstered by the relative privilege high-tech workers enjoy compared to more punishing and
exploitative kinds of work. “None of us are day laborers slaving away at minimum wage and
working in terrible conditions where you would feel like you have cause [for organizing],” said
Connie Schachtel, another Microsoft temp: “Until the discrepancies dawn on them people tend to
feel that if they complain they’re whiners” (cited in Tyson 1999).

Liberal-democratic narratives of worker entrepreneurialism, privilege, and competitiveness
have made their mark on the collective subjectivity of high-tech workers, as Paulina Borsook

the term immaterial labour does not, as in some versions of Marxism, only refer to the fact that
worker x stands in y relation with respect to the means of production. Taking seriously issues of
subjectivity, this approach would give importance to the fact that workers consider themselves to
(Footnote continues on following page)
(2000) has illustrated in her account of the lack of solidarity or empathy characterizing the industry. David Larsen suggests this ethos is connected to a broader, national condition:

I was Vice-President of Washtech for a couple or three years, and I did an awful lot of trying to talk to people during the heart of the tech boom, and it’s like ‘fuck that, I don’t need that… It’s what I like to call the myth of the American rugged individualist. We all depend on each other, we all do better when we all do better, but at the moment the zeitgeist seems to be that greed is in and fuck you, you know? So there isn’t a lot of sharing of knowledge, there isn’t a lot of upwards and onwards progressive thought among people I don’t think (David Larsen interview).

The feeling of being in a privileged position as far as labour relations are concerned, or suspiciousness of collective solutions to problems can be supplemented by a hostile refusal of collective organizing through the established trade union movement. In these cases, the latter is frequently seen as archaic, undemocratic, and generally undesirable. One Microsoft worker, hired on fulltime after the permatemp unrest, points to this silent refusal of the labour movement: “I know people who are here who would quit the company if they had to join a union” (cited in Nachtigal 2005a). Nor do other progressive social movements escape contempt. Brian Globerman recalls the reactions among co-workers at Microsoft when Seattle was flooded with thousands of counter-globalization activists in 1999: “during the WTO protests there were cartoons that were very critical of the protesters in the coffee rooms. You know, ‘all these people are crazy, we’re so trade-dependent’” (Brian Globerman interview).

As we have seen in this case study however, labour precarity acts as an important dividing line in terms of who might support collective organizing in the high tech industry. Those

be very different from industrial factory labour (something many of them, as we have seen, do indeed).
predominantly subject to it - the contractors - are kept in such an unstable position that while they frequently may feel exploited, very few will take the risk of organizing collectively. Not surprising, when Microsoft permatemp Ed Campodinico characterized the general feeling among his more precarious colleagues as one of “anxiety and fear” (cited in Tyson 1999). Collective organizing often presupposes some feeling of ownership or belonging, the type of emotional attachment that has been allowed to wither by Microsoft management. As Denys Howard says, “contractors just don’t want to make any waves. You’re just there as a mercenary, you’re there at the sufferance of the company, you can be let go at any time…” (Denys Howard interview).

Among permanent workers on the other side of the divide there remains a pervasive culture of association with the employer. “They believe in their employers, they trust them. They think ‘they will take care of me’” says Karen Estevenin, who led a narrowly unsuccessful bid to unionize the tech company she used to work for (Karen Estevenin interview). Ironically, the intensity of full-timer exploitation is often much greater, as they regularly work far more than the 40 hours per week the contractors are limited to. “It just breaks my heart sometimes the things that the full-timers will put up with,” Denys Howard says, “They just accept it as a given that they’re going to work fifty or sixty hours a week, and that just amazes me. What I always say to them is ‘our great-grandparents were gunned down in the streets of Chicago for demanding an eight hour workday, why would you just give it up, for no reason whatsoever other than that the company tells you to?’” (Denys Howard interview).

David Larsen describes the effects of working these hours when he was on salary in the mid-1990s: “My first job there in the software testing industry was like seventy hours a week. I didn’t see the sun. I worked all winter and I was at work before the sun came up and I was leaving after
the sun came down... once I crawled under my desk to take a nap I was so tired” (David Larsen interview). Full-timers, as many of the interviewees suggested, often still see the long hours worked on the job as a necessary evil, something one has to grin and bear in order to move up in the company - or simply to assure one’s continued employment there. When the offshore outsourcing process that has been sweeping through the high-tech industry is considered however, this stoicism might not be enough.

4.5.2 From Local to Global Precarity: The Offshoring of Immaterial Labour

Bill Gates presciently suggested in his book *The Road Ahead* that the information highway would “extend the electronic marketplace and make it the ultimate go-between, the universal middleman” (1995, 158). Over a decade later this prediction has certainly rung true in the global marketplace for high-tech immaterial labour, allowing his company to replace portions of its American workforce with cheaper workers from India – “two heads for the price of one” as Microsoft Senior Vice President Brian Valentine infamously suggested in 2003 (cited in Gongloff 2004).

The second major challenge to collective organizing within the high-tech sector is therefore the disciplinary measure available to large-scale information-sector companies of taking advantage of global circuits of production and simply shift its immaterial labour elsewhere.

Since 2000, steady rounds of workforce bloodletting have followed the explosion of the tech bubble in the US, and Microsoft has been at the forefront of attempts to increase profit margins via shifting its immaterial production process to other sites. The company currently has four
thousand employees in India spread out in six different groups and centers (the Global Technical Support Center, the Sales and Marketing Services Group, Global Services India, the Global Delivery Center India, the India Development Center, and Microsoft India Research). Microsoft workers in Bangalore and Hyderabad are performing everything from low-end immaterial labour to more sophisticated research and development work for the company. Nor does this process appear to be slowing: Bill Gates recently announced while on a tour of India that the company would invest an added $1.7 billion (US) into its operations there (Spinelli 2006).

Following a more recent migratory route for offshore outsourcing, Microsoft also announced in 2006 that it was entering into a project with Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) and the Chinese state to create a software outsourcing company in Beijing (Kirby 2005). The joint venture reportedly aims to have 8,000 developers in 5 years, and expand by another 2,000 in the following two years (China Daily Information Company 2006). This adds itself to a 400-employee joint venture between Microsoft and the Shanghai Municipal Government to which the company has outsourced part of its web-based technical support (Yuan 2005).

As a result of such ventures, stories of training one’s replacements flown in for the occasion, such as that recounted by WashTech member and software engineer Stephen Gentry (to whom it happened at Boeing [Steve Gentry interview]), are now commonplace among American tech workers. “Quite frankly, everyone is on pins and needles. They know they might be the next to be laid off. And they are right to be afraid” says WashTech member Judy Tarasek (cited in Talvi 2004).
Informational capital’s mobility has thus introduced another power imbalance into an equation where flexible labour arrangements already allowed it an advantage. Yet the process of outsourcing immaterial labour, as Vincent Mosco points out, is a complex one (2006). Not only is most of the outsourcing work currently destined to developed countries such as Ireland, Canada and the United Kingdom, but the traditionally understood flow from developed to developing countries has in some cases been reversed. In the case of Microsoft, the growing prevalence of this strategy even in the face of what remains a mostly docile high-tech labour force has seen WashTech move away from the issue of temporary employment and concentrate much of its energies on offshore outsourcing and the importation of a workforce through the state-sanctioned process of offering temporary H1-B visas to foreign workers. “I think we thought we could build, just focusing on contract workers, but that just isn’t a viable strategy. The issue’s died down, the militancy of the contractors has died down, as the labor market has gotten more difficult, and clearly it’s out there but it’s not the driving issue such as an outsourcing issue” says Courtney (Marcus Courtney Interview). This turn towards combating offshore outsourcing on the part of Washtech, one which has met with some success, highlights the fact that one cannot understand labour as an inert force in the process – indeed resistance is following in the wake of offshoring and leading to new alliances between unions in the countries affected and emergent international labour federations (Mosco 2006, Mosco and Stevens 2007). It is also important to remember that informational capital’s extraction of surplus value from workers in countries such as India and China is a process that comes with its own set of potential problems, including cultural barriers that remind us of the differences within the ranks of immaterial labour.

What few people have attempted to point out however is that offshore outsourcing merely extends and intensifies the precarity already characterizing the tech sector. As Margaret Bartley
suggests, offshoring is but an extension of exactly the processes the permatemps revolted over: “They started first outsourcing domestically, just to get that technology, get the business organization going, and once it’s a smooth process, then they can start outsourcing the work overseas. So part of it was a training ground for outsourcing…” (Margaret Bartley interview). Such a process has inevitably impacted upon the work of upper-tier high-tech labour as well, making them subject for the first time to the instabilities felt by the permatemps throughout the 1990s. Precarity, if nothing else, democratizes workplace uncertainty.

4.6 WashTech: Preliminary Notes

“I see a lot of parallels between what we’re doing and the auto industry in the 30’s. It was an unorganized industry. The auto industry was the high-tech of its day.” Mike Blain (cited in Rothenburger 1999)

Given its compelling mix of high tech work and collective organization, WashTech has been the subject of increasing academic attention of late. Coming out of debates surrounding the digital divide, Michelle Rodino-Colocino has used the case to persuasively argue that research and theoretical work in the area ought to focus on equality rather than diffusion when it comes to information technology (2006). For Rodino-Colocino, the WashTech case demonstrates that even when access to information technology and the education required to use it is present, power inequities mean that processes like offshore outsourcing can pit one set of workers on one side of the world against those on another. From an industrial relations perspective, Danielle D. van Jaarsveld has argued that as a newer type of union, WashTech has had more success in its activities aimed towards mutual aid and political action than it has in the arena of traditional collective bargaining (2004). In a piece that extensively documents the structural conditions that led to the emergence of the union, van Jaarsveld demonstrates that traditional concerns such as
wages and job security remain relevant in the digital economy. More recently, Rodino-Colocino (2007) has considered the significance of WashTech’s emergence against the global restructuring of labour and, crucially, the links between the emerging composition of knowledge work and the new model of unionism produced by the organization.

The existing research on WashTech has paid less attention to exploring the links between the composition of contemporary high-tech immaterial labour and the subjectivity of high-tech workers however. Put more simply, what are high-tech workers’ experiences of their labour? What are their beliefs regarding collective organization? Where did these come from, and how have they changed? And while collective bargaining is an important function of most unions, the methodology employed in this inquiry has prioritized a focus on a broader range of struggles and the subjectivities that emerge from them. These, as the theorists of the worker inquiry have suggested, always hold the potential to exceed the process of collective bargaining, itself a part of the institutionalization of capital-labour relationships during the twentieth century. Indeed as the WashTech case demonstrates, its very formation and intervention in cases such as the TaxSaver rebellion and agency contractor struggles brought about improvements for permatemps at Microsoft without collective bargaining ever having been on the table.

If this inquiry’s starting point is that immaterial labour is becoming an increasingly important feature of work in general, then the question becomes one of what the WashTech case teaches us about the forms of, and prospects for, the political organization of its subjects? Mike Blain’s quote above contains the implicit suggestion that American history will repeat itself. This is what the autonomists tend to suggest as well: just as Taylorization was implemented during Fordism to destroy craft labour and produced, despite itself, the industrial worker of the factory floor, post-
Fordism’s increasing reliance on forms of immaterial labour in flexible assemblages will at some point generate another recomposition, another unruly subject. It is worthwhile to evaluate, in a preliminary fashion, this belief.

It is certain that, when looking at the software industry workers in the Seattle area, a rather severe bifurcation of labour is taking place. A study carried out by Worker Center on behalf of WashTech at the end of the tech boom painted a fascinating picture of the IT sector, as well as the software sector as a component of it. The study noted that the top 1% of workers in the software sector earned over $11,921 an hour, while the bottom 5% earned less than $15.26 an hour (Worker Center 2001, 4). These figures do not even include the temp workers we have examined in this case study, a population the centre estimated at 8,000 workers. Such a bifurcation in labour’s composition was without question one of the objective spurs for the formation of WashTech.

As we have seen, in many respects, high-tech permatemps are very different from manufacturing labourers, both in the conditions of their respective labour processes and in their subjectivity. The link binding them is the key fact that they both still sell their labour-power as a commodity, something which reminds us that whatever the mode, the economic system they share remains that of capitalism. As evidenced by the WashTech case however, the context in which this sale occurs has been transformed. First of all, in the case of the permatemps there is an additional layer of exploitation present in the form of temp agencies that have become a part of controlling, and thus profiting from, this sale. As a result of this, the legally acceptable form of unionism that emerged during Fordism to advance the collective power of labour is in many cases becoming less viable for the digital economy.
WashTech is an early, timid, faltering, but very real attempt to route around some of the constraints placed on collective organizing by the architects of that economy. It has shed some of the organizational impossibilities handed down from the past. In particular, the notion of a union membership that persists across volatile periods of employment appears to be a key innovation tailored to the precarious condition high-tech immaterial labour finds itself in. In addition, the relative autonomy WashTech enjoys with respect to the CWA is a response to the negative manner in which tech workers perceive the established labour movement. What this first case offers us therefore is one of a high-tech unionism in formation, a grappling with what is to be done with regards to a particular example of immaterial and precarious labour.

None of this takes away from the difficulties faced by any would-be high-tech labour movement. As we have seen, tech-workers’ notorious aversion to collective organizing has begun to crumble, but remains intact in many areas. With the process of offshore outsourcing only in its infancy however, all tiers of immaterial labour save for the very top of the executive hierarchy are becoming vulnerable to the cold logic of “two heads for the price of one.” As the interviews in the case study indicate, this process is aiding the continuing deconstruction of the somewhat untenable subjectivity of the tech-worker as a “professional” to whom collective organizing is a hindrance, a subjective legacy we have examined the roots of.

The role of established labour is key in the discussion of WashTech and the development of a high-tech unionism, as it is for the remaining case studies. The CWA’s gambit in supporting the permatemps is that if the union is built the people will come, although it remains to be seen what the union’s willingness to continue supporting the venture will be if growth continues to be slow among high-tech workers. During the height of the turmoil at Microsoft, then-President of the
CWA Morton Bahr suggested “this may take ten, fifteen years” (cited in Lynch 1999). What is certain is that the CWA is, for now, a vital part of allowing the project of collective organization for American high-tech workers to continue.

At the same time tech workers’ predominantly negative associations when it comes to the established trade unions has been more than just a hindrance to the project of organizing in the sector. As we have seen, even the group that formed WashTech only made the decision to affiliate with the CWA by a very narrow margin in the aftermath of established unions in Washington supporting the legislation limiting overtime pay for tech workers. This reminds us of the value the methodological and strategic approach of prioritizing the fears, hopes and desires of workers has as we press ahead with our case studies.
Chapter 5
Labour and Convergence Inside the Aliant Laboratory

If Microsoft can outsource to India, who can’t?
(Karen Buckley, Aliant Technical Support worker)

Personally what I thought about that strike… it seemed like we were guinea pigs.
(Ferdinand Le Blanc, Aliant Consumer Sales and Service Representative)

Histories of Moncton, which provides the setting for this dissertation’s second worker inquiry, commonly recount that the New Brunswick city received its name due to a clerical error. Named after Robert Monckton (the British military commander who captured nearby Fort Beausejour in 1755 and subsequently oversaw the deportation of the Francophone Acadians), at the moment of its incorporation in 1855 a clerical worker fixed its name with the current mistaken spelling. If this act of an unknown ancestor of today’s call centre workers named the city, its current skyline recalls the more recent history of immaterial labour, of how it has fueled the restructuring of the city and the province. Rising much higher than any of Moncton’s church spires, a 127-metre concrete microwave communications tower dominates the horizon from its downtown location. Built in 1971 for NBTel, the then-monopoly telecommunications provider for the province, it was renamed the Aliant Tower after the merger of four Maritime telecommunications companies in 1999. During a five month strike in 2004, with the front entrance of the Aliant building adjacent to the tower surrounded by picketers, company management had a hole ripped through the brick wall at the back to create an entrance for the managers and replacements brought in to carry out the tasks of the striking workers. The patch where that door has been filled in with newer bricks is still visible today, a scar from the information-age labour conflict that played itself out under the Aliant Tower in Moncton and across the Maritimes.
This chapter examines the strike against Aliant by workers who are a part of the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP). It does so by taking a closer look at a particular segment of Aliant’s workforce: a group of employees in Moncton, New Brunswick who carry out “clerical” functions at the company and are members of Local 506 of the CEP. If the WashTech workers in the last chapter adapted to the severe precarity of their labour conditions by forming what has been called an “open-source” union, the Moncton, New Brunswick knowledge workers animating this inquiry have recently become part of a “convergent” union, an organizational form taken by several telecommunications unions in North America in order to adapt to some of the processes at the heart of post-Fordism. While this case study examines a distinctive form of collective organization arising from the ranks of immaterial labour, like the WashTech case we will examine, the form is not completely new: Aliant workers across the Maritimes are heirs to the kind of company-level collective bargaining that became enshrined within what Vanda Rideout refers to as Canada’s “permeable Fordist” telecommunications regime (2003, 3-46).

The 2004 strike occurred at the intersection of a set of the familiar processes unleashed by the widespread restructuring of telecommunications, including privatization, convergence (both of ownership and of technological platforms), and restructuring. Aliant is a prime example of the convergent telecommunications corporation, forged as it was out of a merger between the four ex-public monopoly telecommunication providers from the provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland. Having been allowed to agglomerate over
previously watertight provincial boundaries, the new company wasted no time in beginning to tinker internally with the way it organized the labour process. As a result, in what follows I suggest the new company became a kind of laboratory, where experiments were carried out in the adoption of new technology, facility closures, layoffs, the electronic transfer of work, and the repurposing of its workers for new parts of the immaterial production process. Furthermore, the 2004 strike was a key moment of this experimentation: not only was Aliant testing the strength of its inherited union, but the conflict unfolding across the Maritime provinces was being watched by convergent telecommunications companies elsewhere in Canada. The Aliant-CEP strike was a key part of a cycle of labour struggles in the sector, including the near-strike of Bell Canada by its 7,500 CEP technicians in Ontario and Quebec that same year and the bitter Telus lockout of its Telecommunications Workers Union (TWU) employees in 2005 (Mosco and McKercher 2006, Niemeijer 2004, Shniad 2005, 2007).

The people examined in this chapter work the call-centre jobs that are the emblematic “digital assembly lines” of cognitive capitalism (Head 2003). These have mushroomed in New Brunswick due to the political and economic backdrop, most importantly the province’s shift from the industries that had provided jobs in the postwar years towards an aggressive plan to turn the province into a regional gem of informationalism for a wired economy. A key part of this restructuring has been the strategy of attracting outsourced knowledge work positions (primarily in call centres, but also higher-end work such as software production) from both Canadian and American companies. This has allowed New Brunswick to become part of a “nearshoring” trend adopted by globally networked corporations, one that belies unidirectional models of the

42 Other examples would include WashTech’s parent union, the Communication Workers of (Footnote continues on following page)
outsourcing of immaterial labour from developed to developing countries (Austen 2004, Mosco 2006). The workers at the heart of this inquiry, therefore, live one of the most prolific and infamous occupational productions of post-Fordist economies. The Aliant clerical/call centre employees in Moncton work the same job as at least one out of every twenty of their fellow New Brunswickers, and thus live and breathe life in a province where the immaterial labour in the “contact” centres sustaining global corporations such as AOL, UPS, and others has become a cornerstone of economic production.

The status of these workers as members of CEP offers an example of unionized call centre workers in North America however, a rarity in the profession (if not in the telecommunications industry they are a part of). As a result, Aliant’s laboratory experiments had a tinge of weird science to them: the form of collective organizing enacted by the CEP 506 workers in New Brunswick is also in some ways a hybrid, a Siamese twin where the emergent jobs of the information society and the institutionally enshrined forms of collective action forged within Fordism are conjoined. Aliant’s ultimate goal was and remains that of isolating the kind of control over its labour process enjoyed by management at the non-unionized call centres dotting New Brunswick, while at the same time severing its ties with the union it inherited in the merger.

If the 2004 strike was an experiment for Aliant management, it was no less a test of the soundness of the CEP’s organizational form in a changed political, economic, and symbolic landscape. Representing everyone from forestry workers to journalists, the organization is a prime example of a convergent union (Mosco and McKercher 2006). In an age of outsourcing, America and, to a lesser extent, the Telecommunications Worker’s Union in Canada.
success for the CEP would primarily mean maintaining for Aliant employees the kinds of protections telecommunication workers had achieved in a Fordist regime.

This case study draws on archival data in the form of newspaper articles, proceedings of regulatory decisions, CEP union literature, and 14 interviews with clerical/call-centre workers in Moncton, New Brunswick conducted in April of 2006. The chapter first offers a brief political-economic context for the strike by recounting the restructuring of the city and the province and the resulting composition of call-centre labour in New Brunswick. I then examine the process of convergence as it was enacted by, and affected, Aliant and the CEP. Moving inside the process of immaterial production, I look at the resulting experiments in the transformation of the labour process at the company and the 2004 strike as described by the workers I interviewed, as well as the subsequent restructuring and the uncertainties faced by those workers. Finally, I offer some preliminary considerations on the case and what it suggests to us about convergent trade unionism as an organizational form adopted by immaterial labour.

5.1 Moncton: We’re OK

As major employers began to pull out of Moncton in the 1970s and into the subsequent decade (a list would include Canadian Forces Base Moncton, Canadian National’s locomotive shops, and the Eaton’s catalogue division) the slogan of this fledgling entrepreneurial city at the end of the 1980s became simply “Greater Moncton: We’re OK.” If by some accounts the slogan unconsciously reflected the battered feeling amongst its increasingly unemployed citizens by the end of the decade, Moncton’s employment base would be radically transformed by the political-economic transformations in New Brunswick during the late 1980s and into the 1990s. This
restructuring was a part of the “New Economic Strategy” enacted by the Liberal provincial
government of Frank McKenna (which gained power in 1987) in partnership with NBTel, the
province’s monopoly telephone provider.

The theory supporting the restructuring was simple: if the province’s traditional forms of
employment were dying, a wave of new opportunities for profit existed in the form of an
emerging information technology sector and its immaterial production, which, with the right
environment, could be attracted to the province to replace the jobs lost on the fish-packing line
and the railway industry. Attracting call-centres would provide the bedrock for employment until
New Brunswick became an upper-tier information technology province, at which point higher-
end IT work could be brought in. In this way, through an adaptation and refashioning of labour,
the province would pole vault from a hinterland of offshored bits of the labour process to a
heartland of immaterial production.

Bolstered by its close relationship with the Provincial government, NBTel invested heavily in
fibre-optics and digital switching technologies during the 1990s. The result was a state of the art,
province-wide telecommunications infrastructure that allowed, through its fibre-optic backbone
connections, potentially seamless integration between the headquarters of major American and
Canadian companies and their New Brunswick operations (United Nations Conference on Trade
and Development [UNCTAD] 2005, 197). As Tom Good and Joan McFarland (2005, 104) have
documented in their research on the political economy of call centres in New Brunswick, by 1999
NBTel was offering to cover virtually all of the costs associated with telecommunications
hardware and software, as well as its maintenance and regular upgrading, for companies which
were considering establishing a call centre in New Brunswick.
If NBTel offered companies the cutting edge technology, the Provincial government took care of providing the workforce and financial incentives (Balka 2002, Good and McFarland 2005, McFarland and Buchanan 1998). Indeed there were important structural features of the New Brunswick “business climate” that were promoted by McKenna’s government to both newly globalizing businesses and older, established international corporations looking to relocate portions of their productive process. A key plank of New Brunswick’s rise to dominance in the call-centre field was that the province had one of the lowest unionization rates, and one of the highest unemployment rates, in Canada. This trend holds strong: as a recent study by Statistics Canada suggests (cited in Vancouver Sun 2005), the province has suffered the greatest decline of any Canadian province in unionization rates since 1981, a full 11% of its total. As McKenna promoted his political-economic strategy for the province, a full 12% of the active labour force (roughly 40,000 people) was officially unemployed, a figure that did not even include part-time or casual workers seeking full time work (Good and McFarland 2005, 99).

The neoliberal orientation of the McKenna government went beyond the standard entrepreneurial advertising of itself in its promotional literature into enthusiastic pronouncements regarding the weakness of organized labour in the province. As the New Brunswick Department of Economic Development and Tourism website proclaimed in 1999:

The industry that reflects call centre activities the most is the communications industry and [in that industry] New Brunswick has the lowest rate of unionization in Canada… NBTel is the only telephone company in Canada with non-unionized clerical employees… There has never been an industry attempt to unionize [call centres in the province] (cited in Good and McFarland 2005, 111).
Merely signaling the existence of this pool of skilled, non-unionized, and chronically unemployed workers was not enough however, and the Liberals set about to ensure its steady reproduction. During the 1990s, educational initiatives were enacted so as to reproduce the industry’s workforce in the decades to come. Computer literacy became mandatory for high school graduates, and both public and private institutions began to offer call centre and IT training programs (UNCTAD 2005, 197, emphasis added).

This training has evolved to include technical assistance/helpdesk operations as well as business-to-business sales, applications development and sophisticated customer service courses. Diversification into other back-office functions such as accounts receivables, human resource management and accounts management has also occurred, and the workforce continues to be trained in the skills and technologies required to handle effectively skilled transactional work. Career websites, electronic job fairs, toll-free numbers and electronic databases have been established to gather information on people with the skills and interests to work in the industry. There have also been efforts to draw on non-traditional labour pools, such as students, disabled persons and seniors, made possible in part by a targeted wage/training subsidy programme.

A third factor of the composition of labour in the province that made New Brunswick an excellent candidate for the outsourcing of immaterial production is its entrenched bilingualism. A legacy of the Acadians who trickled back into New Brunswick after their 1755 expulsion, 45 percent of call centre workers in the province speak both English and French, a factor which makes them attractive employees for Canadian or American companies who need to manage their interaction with a bilingual Canadian customer base.

In addition to a state of the art infrastructure and a highly educated, bilingual and obedient workforce, McKenna’s government offered billions in forgivable loans to lure companies’ call centre operations to New Brunswick. Understandably enticed by the seemingly foolproof
packaging of the province’s infrastructure and immaterial labour, by one count 35 call centres were established in the province between 1991 and 1996 (Jaimet 2006). Camco, a subsidiary of General Electric, was reportedly the first in 1991, and was soon followed by the larger inbound call centres of companies such as Air Canada, Royal Bank, and Xerox Corp (Good and McFarland 2005). The latter company opened a call centre in Saint John with a $3.8-million grant from the McKenna government contingent on creating 225 jobs (Jaimet 2006). By 2002 in Moncton alone there were 43 call centres employing an estimated 6,000 workers (Warson 2002) who interacted with the customers of companies such as AOL Canada, which opened a call centre employing 300 workers in 2002 (Kitchener Waterloo-Record 2002).

The trend of offering incentives continued under the next Premier, Bernard Lord, after the Progressive Conservatives won by a landslide in the 1999 provincial election (Lord ran in the Moncton East district). In 2004 a U.S. call-centre company expected to bring 50 jobs to the town of Neguac in Northeast New Brunswick received a $625,000 provincial assistance package. Virtual-Agent Services, whose head office is in Moncton, already operated six call centres in New Brunswick at the time (Canadian Press 2003). In 2006, the Provincial government approved a $2.26-million forgivable loan for Minacs Worldwide (in the Moncton area) for the company to use towards job training. It was the second such forgivable loan the province granted the company (which laid off 36 workers in 2004) in recent years (Canadian Press 2004, Canadian Press 2006).

Yet if the workforce promised to be docile, its behaviour was not completely consistent with such an image. Clerical employees at ICT Group (a large call centre) in Saint John voted to unionize with the CEP in 1999, bringing the spectre of trade unionism into the industry for the
As with other examples of collective organizing within the service sector however, the company quickly closed the location down and relocated. The provincial government, despite having offered $400,000 in public incentives for the company to relocate there, took no action to recuperate the money (Brearton 2005).

5.2 The Composition of Call Centre Work in New Brunswick

Almost twenty years after McKenna took power, his restructuring of New Brunswick along informational lines has profoundly marked the composition of labour in the province. To get a sense of this, it is useful to compare emerging patterns in the province’s workforce with the broader Canadian context, which, albeit not to the same extent, has registered similar changes. A recent Statistics Canada report (2005) offers a glimpse of the composition of Canadian call-centres. Nationally, there was an increase from 20,000 call-centre jobs in 1987 to 112,000 in 2004. The industry employs a much higher proportion of women and youth, and pays lower wages than the service industry at large. Almost one-third of call-centre jobs are held by youths aged 15 to 24, a figure that becomes even more significant when one considers that this demographic makes up only 17 per cent of jobholders in all service industries. Women, proving that this subset of affective labour has a mostly female face, make up 60% of workers in the field. In 2004, workers in the industry earned on average $12.45 an hour, much less than the service sector average of $18.10 and the overall average of $18.50. And call centre work is far from stable: 85% of workers in the industry had short job tenure (five years or less), compared with 55% for all service industries and 53% for all industries combined (Ibid).
By 2004 about one-quarter of all employment in the call centre industry was in Atlantic Canada, most notably in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (this compared with the region’s 7% share of total employment in both the service industries as a whole and in all industries combined). In New Brunswick, current estimates of the total number of call-centre workers range between 14,000 (Good and McFarland 2005), 18,000 (UNCTAD 2004), and 20,000 people working in around 100 call centres and contributing $1 billion to the provincial economy yearly (Kitchener-Waterloo Record 2006). It is unclear whether these figures include the emerging field of so-called “virtual contact centres,” where people work from smaller satellite operations of the larger centres or from home. This notwithstanding, by these figures somewhere around one in 20 people in the provincial labour force today takes or makes telephone calls for a living.

The level of education and linguistic abilities of the workforce have been key reasons employers have been so keen to relocate these operations to the province. As we shall see, these workers are highly educated: estimates are that a full 70% of call centre workers in New Brunswick have a post-secondary education. Finally, reflecting yet at the same time exceeding patterns across the country, Good and McFarland estimate that in the typical New Brunswick call centre 60% to 80% of workers are female while managers, however, remain mostly male (Good and McFarland 2005, 106). Interviews with the New Brunswick clerical/call centre workers confirmed this, with the usual splits within the hierarchies of immaterial labour that researchers like Ellen Balka have drawn our attention to (2002). Aliant workers confirmed this trend anecdotally in interviews. Donovan Richard, who does tech support for web-hosting, websites, and domain names for the company suggests: “The technical group it’s mostly guys, but if you look in the other department, like for sales, operator services, those are mostly women” (Donovan Richard interview).
5.3 Convergence at Aliant and the CEP

The process of convergence within the media and telecommunications industries has been a key conceptual lens for critical political-economic analyses of the sector (Winseck 1998, McKercher 2002, Mosco 2003). In such usage, convergence commonly refers to ownership across previously distinct industry sectors (such as television and telephone), supported by technological convergence (towards digitization as a common language), through which production is coordinated across the emergent conglomerates. More recently, the concept has been applied to labour organizations as well (Chaison 1996, Mosco and McKercher 2006). Taken together, these processes increasingly mean that conceiving of Canadian telecommunications (telephone, wireless, internet) and media (film and television) as separate industries is becoming a less viable approach in the search to produce an understanding of the processes at work within the companies straddling them. Rather, within the telecommunications industry’s shift from a public monopoly Fordist regime to a privatized post-Fordist one, we now have numerous examples of what Rideout (2003, 119) refers to as “continental oligopolies.”

In 1999 BC Telecom and Telus Corp (formerly Alberta Government Telephones) merged, creating BC Telus. The move was a direct challenge to the existing balance of power in Stentor (a formal alliance of Canada's major telecommunications companies) but especially to Bell Canada/BCE, which during the same time was entrenching its position by entering the cable distribution, television, and daily newspaper markets. The Maritimes were no exception to this process:43 The creation of Aliant in June 1999 through the merger of four Maritime provincial monopolies had an alliance through the Atlantic Provinces Telecommunications Council (APTC). By 1997 it was announcing joint ventures in network (Footnote continues on following page)
telephone companies (Bruncor Inc., Island Telecom Inc., Maritime Telegraph and Telephone Company, and NewTel Enterprises Limited) was a part of this convergence. The merger created the third-largest telecommunications company in Canada, worth an estimated $3 billion, with 9,000 employees (Aliant 1999). In early 2000 BCE increased its controlling interest in the firm to 42 percent (Rideout 2003, 119), and by 2004 its stake had risen to 53 percent (Wong 2004).

These newly converged companies, having lost during the nineties the long distance monopolies their Fordist predecessors once enjoyed, have compensated for the lost revenue by offering new services like wireless, internet access, and satellite television. In a move that has been enabled by the CRTC through its loosening of the older service requirements imposed upon monopoly providers, corporate architects have gutted the workforces of these companies and, in the process, carried out a sustained attack on the unions they inherited (Niemeijer 2004, Shniad 2005, 2007).

...investment and restructuring, the key part of which was the announcement that administrative software applications in human resources, logistics and financial operations would be operated from a single site for all four companies, at NewTel Information Solutions in St. John's (Atlantic Provinces Telecommunications Council 1997).

The new company disposed of an array of businesses: NBTel, MTT, Island Tel, NewTel Communications (Telecommunications), NBTel Mobility, MTT Mobility, Island Tel Mobility, NewTel Mobility and Tele-Direct Atlantic (Wireless), xwave solutions, MITI Information Technology Inc., Island Tel Advanced Solutions, and NBTel's IT division (Information technology), Stratos Global Corporation (Mobile satellite services), AMI Offshore, Salter New Media, InfoInterActive (Emerging business) and an assortment of others (TecKnowledge Health Care, ConneCTIvity, iMagicTV, NBTel Global, New North Media, and NewTech Instruments – Aliant 1999).

In the United States, examples from the telecommunications sector include the recent purchase of Verizon Communications Inc. of MCI Inc in 2005, the $16 Billion USD acquisition of AT&T Corp. by regional phone giant SBC Communications Inc, and the $35 billion USD merger of Sprint Corp. and Nextel Communications (Noguchi 2005). The effect on telecommunications workers and the collective organizations they inherited from the Fordist telecommunications regime has been devastating. From 1998 to 2003, traditional wire-line companies in the United States eliminated 15.5 percent of their jobs, which paid 26 percent more than those in the cable (Footnote continues on following page)
Aliant, as suggested in the introduction, enacted numerous experiments in convergent restructuring: after the merger it closed operator service operations in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island, centralized significant parts of its other operations, downsized its workforce by several hundred employees, and transferred a major part of its Network Surveillance operations and Buildings Real Estate management to its parent company, Bell Canada. After the strike Aliant employed about 8,400 people, and its 2004 revenues were more than $2 billion with profits of $137 million (Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada 2005). Following a corporate rearrangement in 2006 Bell Aliant was launched, an entity which derives all of its income from its indirect ownership in Bell Aliant Regional Communications Holdings, Limited Partnership. The new company combines Aliant's former wireline operation in Atlantic Canada, information technology and other operations and Bell Canada's former wireline operation in its regional territories in Ontario and Quebec, and indirect interest in Telebec, Limited Partnership and NorthernTel, Limited Partnership, boosting employment numbers to 10,000. Bell Aliant’s 2006 revenues stood at $852 million.

5.4 Unionization and the Labour Process

By 2000 Aliant was the largest regional corporate telco, and like Telus it faced its own version of the “converging trade unions” that are organizing workers across the communication, information, and media sectors (Mosco and McKercher 2006, 747-748). In this case it was the industry, where employment grew 22.6 percent, according to Jeffrey H. Keefe, a researcher at the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington research institute (cited in Belson 2004). Over all, the (Footnote continues on following page)
CEP, a union whose “communication” portion was born in the early 1970s when the Canadian contingent of the Communications Workers of America opted for secession from their US-based parent. The union has, since the 1990s, pursued a strategy of convergence, merging with two other unions to create the CEP in the early 1990s (McKercher 2002).

This variety of convergence would be supported by the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB), which closely followed and intervened in the state of labour/management relations at the resulting company in the aftermath of the 1999 merger. Prior to the amalgamation of Aliant, the Atlantic telcos contained nine bargaining units representing 3,780 employees (CIRB 2002). The CEP represented craft, clerical and operator units in Newfoundland and Labrador at NewTel (CEP Local 410) and Prince Edward Island at IslandTel (CEP Local 401), but only craft and operator bargaining units in New Brunswick at NBTel (CEP Local 506). In Nova Scotia, the historically more militant Atlantic Communications and Technical Workers Union (ACTWU), that by all accounts had the best collective agreement of the four, represented employees in all three occupations. The workers examined in this chapter were the only non-unionized clerical/call centre employees of these four companies prior to the Aliant merger and the subsequent proceedings before the CIRB.

In the literature surrounding the merger, whether it is in union publications, press releases, CIRB decisions or quotes from representatives of Aliant, these workers are most often defined as “clerical” workers. This differentiates them from “operator” services (who, despite the massive number of telecommunications workers represented by a union has fallen 23 percent since 2000, to 273,000, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (cited in Belson 2004).
automation affecting their jobs still carry out a contemporary iteration of the roles they have played since the emergence of telephony) and “craft” or “outside” workers, who repair lines, install new services, etc. Nonetheless, the clerical employees at Aliant are also referred to frequently (both within the aforementioned literature and by workers themselves) as “clerical/call centre” or simply “call centre” workers - names that register the changes their labour process has undergone as a result of the transformation of old monopoly telephone providers into convergent post-Fordist companies.

Now, perhaps more than ever, companies such as Aliant, Bell Canada, and Telus need employees who can interact with the customer in both an efficient and affectively productive manner. These employees must tell customers about the packages on offer, bargain with them, or sell them more expensive packages than they already have. The role of these workers does not end with sales however. A range of technical difficulties can emerge once the customers are signed up, and call centre/clerical workers have another role as the front-line solvers of such problems in relaying information to the customer so as to keep the services running or avoid the expense of a physical visit to the location in question. Finally, such companies have a need to coordinate the visits of “outside” workers to homes or businesses in order to install or repair service, a task that is also carried out by clerical/call centre workers. The workers interviewed for this chapter work in all three of these capacities. Many simply refer to their jobs as “call centre” jobs.

Why these workers were not unionized previous to the formation of Aliant is unclear. The CEP had tried to unionize them at least twice previously in the 1990s, without success. As one worker describes it:
We were presented with it, and we were asked to join the union throughout my career at least twice before we actually did. [...] And we voted on it, and voted against it because whatever [the other unionized clerical/call centre workers in other provinces] had, we also got. Without paying the union dues or anything like that. I mean in terms of money and hours of work [...] As far as protection and stuff like that, we didn’t have what they had, but we didn’t feel the need to have it, at that point in time (Aliant worker 1 interview).

Frequently cited reasons for this lack of unionization were either that clerical workers at NBTel were previously suspicious of established trade unions, or that they had a reasonably good relationship with management, or both. Whether the suspicion arose from personal experience or elsewhere, it often included opinions of trade unions as overly bureaucratic or as inclined to focus on petty aspects of the labour-management relationship. Others pointed to what they suggested was New Brunswick’s lack of a strong labour history, or to the strong work ethic of its inhabitants. One worker’s comments are typical: “It’s lacking compared to the other provinces. Especially in Moncton, because it’s more of a service city, not an industry. If you go up north, where the economy runs on paper mills and other wood products, they’re all unionized right, so union is a lot stronger in the northern economy (Aliant worker 2 interview).

Whatever the barriers, on the heels of the merger, in March of 2000 the CEP began its third campaign to organize the clerical and call-centre workers in New Brunswick (CEP 2001). After a card-signing meeting with the majority of the workers, the CEP applied to the Canada Industrial Relations Board for certification in August 2000. Aliant sought a review of the bargaining unit structure in the same year. In an application to the CIRB (on October 20, 2000), it requested the consolidation of the nine bargaining units into one. In Aliant’s testimony before CIRB, Sharon Duggan acknowledged the company’s strategy of convergence, suggesting that a consolidation of bargaining units was necessary in order to create a single organization able to withstand
competition (cited in CIRB 2002, 4). Yet for Aliant the convergence was not to extend to labour: The New Brunswick clerical workers were to be left out of this deal since they were not unionized prior to the merger.

The existing bargaining units agreed to the merger, and by order of the CIRB on September 25, 2001 a single bargaining unit, representing all of Aliant’s unionized workers, was formed. The bargaining agent for the new unit was to be the Council of Atlantic Telecommunication Unions (CATU), which was formed through an agreement between the CEP and the ACTWU. The CIRB thus granted Aliant its wish, yet in its decision the Board also ordered the unionization of the nearly 800 clerical employees in New Brunswick, who were to be included in the newly convergent bargaining unit (now some 4,300 workers strong). The CIRB’s endorsement of the process of convergence and its position that this ought to extend to labour representation was seen as a victory for the unions involved. Sensing that the newly unionized call centre workers could be an important signal to other workers on the province’s digital assembly lines, Vice-President of the CEP’s Atlantic Region Max Michaud marked the decision by suggesting these were “among the first-ever call centre workers to join a union in Canada” and that the CEP hoped their unionization would “open the door for others who desperately need the protection of a union” (CEP 2001).

In October of 2001 the CIRB fixed a common expiry date of December 31st, 2001 for all collective agreements at Aliant. Like Aliant, CATU was not an indiscriminate fan of convergence: in a bid to delay the job loss to come with the imminent restructuring, the unions fought Aliant’s application of technological convergence by seeking an order that the company hold off its plans to centralize network operation functions. The Board declined CATU’s request
but again intervened into the process, issuing an Order encouraging the parties to reach an agreement on the general integration of seniority by no later than November 25, 2001, under threat of arbitration. In addition, the Board imposed restrictions on Aliant’s consolidation of its workforce, forcing the company to give notice of any such planned restructuring, as well as the employees this was likely to affect, to CATU in writing at least 120 days prior. CATU and Aliant agreed to submit to arbitration regarding the integration of seniority across bargaining units, a necessary step before the inevitable restructuring to come. As a result, on February 19, 2002 the arbitrator produced an Interim Collective Agreement that determined such provisions until a new collective agreement had been reached.

5.5 Inside the Aliant Laboratory: Convergence, Language, and the Labour Process

While CATU and Aliant jousted before the CIRB, the labour process for clerical/call-centre workers in New Brunswick was being subjected to regular rounds of upheaval. In this section I first examine the kinds of skills required for these positions, and then discuss the struggle between management and its immaterial labour over how those abilities are put to work.

The kinds of work carried out by the clerical/call-centre workers require a set of skills that are linguistic, communicative, and, at their extreme, affective. Not only is the generic human faculty of speech put to work at Aliant, but it must by necessity be paired with the ability to speak two languages in a bilingual province. In addition, many workers suggest that specific regional and cultural knowledge is a key part of creating not only a communicative, but an affective bond when they speak to customers from their province: “I get a lot of calls from the French communities also, and I know pretty much all the different areas, so I can relate to customers a
lot…. sometimes they have different dialects from different areas, and you can recognize what region they’re from, and right away you can empathize with them” (Philippe Roy Interview).

This extends to knowledge of the dialect that has emerged as a mixture between English and French: “Some people mix their French and English, and if you’re only French or only English you’re not able to understand that type of language. You need to be able to switch from French to English rapidly, because a lot of people do that” (Sandy Brideau interview).

When asked what management expected of their interaction with callers, the clerical/call-centre workers frequently underscore the affective demands of their job: “They want me to build a relationship with a customer, definitely” says one worker (Aliant worker 2 interview). Management stressed this dimension of the job to Donovan Richard from the beginning: “I got to Aliant, [and] they said ‘we can train for computers, but not for customer service’” (Donovan Richard interview). In this way not only is language put to work at the company, but something else is happening as well: many of the affective abilities gained outside the specific workplace are being used in the labour process, whether these come from experience gained in the service sector at large or even a simple aptitude for dealing with people. As Jim-Bob Chaloux summarizes, “communication is everything, it’s the nature of our business” (Jim-Bob Chaloux interview).

Like the Microsoft permatemps discussed in the previous chapter, Aliant workers frequently define their jobs in the terminology characteristic of liberal-democratic visions of knowledge work. “Multitasking would probably be the best description for my job,” says Karen Buckley, who does tech support (Karen Buckley interview). Another employee echoes this: “I’m a
problem-solver and a trouble-shooter by nature” (Aliant worker 3 interview). The latter’s job as an assigner for new phone and cable lines involves “a lot of logic, and knowledge, and if it didn’t I wouldn’t be here right now talking to you because the computer would probably be doing my job right now” (Ibid).

While their work cannot be automated for the time being, the linguistic, communicative, and affective skill-set necessary for it is being pushed closer to its limits in an attempt to extract as much labour from these workers as possible. For at the same time as they are expected to develop productive relationships with the customer, balancing several responsibilities and finding solutions to their problems, virtually all of the workers interviewed suggested that, since the merger, Aliant has subjected these responsibilities to a different series of logics and rhythms, ones that are much closer to those of call centres in the rest of the province. For Sandy Brideau, who recently moved from clerical to craft duties, the transformation towards a post-Fordist workplace was pretty sharp. Prior to 2001, he suggests, management referred to the kind of work they were doing as “help desk” work: “[There is] a big difference between help desk and call-centre. And then, three years after, they sent an email [and] for the first time it says ‘…the call centre working hours.’ So we said, ‘what happened with [the] help desk?’ ‘Ahhh [they said]… by the way, no, we’re a call centre’” (Sandy Brideau interview).

Brideau further notes that the term entered Aliant company discourse “shortly after we signed our union card” (Ibid). Indeed management could not have been unaware as it implemented these changes of the well-entrenched methods of disciplining immaterial labour - and the lack of unionization - of the typical North American call centre. This shift from help desk to call centre work has been much more than a matter of semantics for the workers involved. Philippe Roy
suggests that since the merger his work is “very structured: call flows, you know, productivity and sales quotas and everything. It is very call-centre structured now, more than it was before” (Philippe Roy interview). For most of the call-centre-like positions among the Moncton CEP 506 members, this increasingly involves a process which now unites them with their non-unionized colleagues across the province: increased monitoring and disciplining based on performance. As Philippe Roy suggests, “…if the performance isn’t there, they notice fairly quickly” (Roy Interview). When asked about this increased surveillance at work, the Aliant workers are virtually unanimous in their dislike of it. One of them describes it as like having “an extra pair of eyes behind you all the time” (Keenan Richard interview).

Every person interviewed suggested that the upshot of this shift toward a call centre-like labour process has been a decreasing ability for them to affectively connect with, and adequately assist, the customer. Many of the CEP 506 call centre workers associate this with the kinds of rhythms their non-unionized counterparts are facing across New Brunswick. Aliant workers know these well, as many have experience at other call centres or at the very least know friends and relatives who have. Karen Buckley describes the industry and what working in it did to her daughter:

The call centre industry is getting a bad name because of the stress level that is added to the individual who’s working that particular job. The expectation that one person is going to extrapolate that kind of quality from interacting with a person on the telephone… it’s unreasonable, it’s unbelievable, and it’s landed so many people in stress leaves from work that the unemployment office actually has a way to deal with them. You know that there’s an issue when unemployment now has a way, when you go to unemployment and tell them that you’re out on stress leave, they’ll send you back to school to reeducate you to do something else, provided you never ever ever, ever, go back to call centre industry. Because my daughter took it. Yeah, they’ll pay her UI for the whole time she’s in school provided she never goes back to a call centre. […] She was working at Client Logic. And she was their top salesman for 2 consecutive
months prior to leaving on stress! And they were still hounding her because her calls weren’t less than 12 minutes. […] The strategy at Client Logic was that if your whole team didn’t make the grade, you were fired (Karen Buckley interview).

While there are increasing similarities between their work and that of their non-unionized colleagues, Aliant employees still retain a greater ability to resist such pressures when they impede them from carrying out their responsibilities as they feel they ought to. For several interviewees this personal standard of professionalism superseded management’s demands, and, doubtless bolstered by the fact that there is a union behind them, the call centre workers are sometimes able to take matters into their own hands:

…with the Quality Care they want you to talk on average X amount of minutes on each call, but to me numbers aren’t as important. I do very well on certain things where I know, but there are certain things that they’re going to ask and I know I won’t do as well as they want me to do, but I still take the time anyways. […] I don’t think they can fire me for taking the time to help the customer, so I just take the time! (Aliant worker 2 Interview).

Beyond resisting such changes to the labour process, the greater Taylorization evident in the work of some call centre workers at Aliant was not present in that of other clerical workers at the company. Indeed when it comes to some kinds of clerical IT labour, expertise still resides with workers rather than being embedded in software. When pressed on the point of whether she had more knowledge of her job than her supervisors, Karen Buckley (who does tech support for IPTV and webhosting) suggests: “Yeah! Far more! They remind me of a group of people playing with toy soldiers. All the little plastic men are lined up, but they don’t have a clue what’s going on in any of their heads” (Karen Buckley interview). Donovan Richard experiences this as well: “…probably because our group is a little bit more experienced, we’ve been there a long time… the supervisors we have now don’t really know what we do” (Donovan Richard interview).
These are some of the key areas in which, amid a transforming labour process, the struggle for control between management and labour at Aliant is playing out. The early changes were, in retrospect, warnings of the newly converged company’s approach to its labour control strategy. By 2003, entering a newly competitive telecommunications environment, Aliant management was determined to break the convergent union it had created in its wake.

5.6 The Aliant Strike and Union Convergence

Bottom line, we were pawns for our bigger company, Bell. If we were going to sign a contract that was good, then Bell [workers] would want a better contract. (Jim-Bob Chaloux interview)

If the labour process at Aliant had been rapidly transforming as management began to tinker with the workflow of a newly converged corporation, the labour strife to come was to be a large-scale experiment in the convergent strike. As the strife broke out in 2004, trade unions and convergent telecommunications companies across Canada were paying close attention. In Ontario and Quebec, 7,500 CEP technicians were locked in contract talks with Bell Canada, with similar issues (job security, pensions and wages) coming up as key. On the west coast, the TWU and Telus were in the middle of a 4-year dispute. Thousands of TWU members had been without a contract for years and eyes were turned to Atlantic Canada to assess what might happen when push came to shove. Indeed the issues on the table in all three situations appeared to be

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The month-long dispute in between these two parties in 1999 had offered one of the first glimpses of the struggles to come in a converged media and telecommunications sector. At issue was Bell’s plan to contract out 1,300 of its call-centre jobs to Nordia, a company co-owned by itself and American company Excell Global Services. Bell was successful in this attempt, and the jobs were contracted for half the price of unionized positions. In 2003 Nordia voted to unionize however, and employees there are now represented by the United Steelworkers (Keelaghan 2005).
remarkably similar. On the management side, as Niemeijer (2004) has suggested, Aliant was absolutely focused on “cutting costs by reducing workforces, eliminating restrictive contract language, and reducing benefits.” For CATU the primary concern was defending both the positions of unionized workers at the company against outsourcing and the traditional Defined Benefit pension system against the plan offered by Aliant, with wages also being a concern.

On December 1, 2003, Aliant workers across Atlantic Canada voted by a 92.5% margin to give their negotiating committee the authority to call a strike. Aliant and CATU had been squaring off for three years since the bargaining Council was formed at the behest of the CIRB, and by the time the strike vote happened it was almost two years since Aliant workers had enjoyed a contract. Despite the strike vote, Aliant was unwilling to offer CATU what it wanted on pensions and outsourcing. Negotiations broke down, and in March 2004 the CEP negotiators sought a new strike mandate following Aliant’s offer.

As the strike approached, both sides emphasized their strengths. Aliant management played up its ability to circumvent strike action via a combination of automation and managers carrying out the jobs of striking workers. "We've got pretty good systems, a good network," suggested the company’s public affairs manager Brenda Reid, “We don't expect if there is a work stoppage that it will have any major impact on the network itself” (cited in Macphee 2004). The company was

47 A defined benefit plan provides union members with retirement benefits that are directly tied to wages and years of service. Benefit amounts are known and are set based on a formula that is laid out within the text of the plan. Defined contribution plans instead have set contributions by employers and employees. Employers find these plans attractive because they can accurately predict how much they will be required to invest in the plan. Yet in defined contribution plans members do not know what their benefits will be once they are retired.
training over 1,800 of its 2,200 managers to fill in for technical and clerical operators. A strike would see the company pit its managers and automated telephone networks and software against the workers’ withdrawal of their labour.

For its part, the strategy of the 150,000-member CEP as it prepared to take on Aliant became clear: while it would likely not be able to shut down Aliant’s networks entirely, it might cause enough of a slowdown to routine maintenance, repair, and support functions to jeopardize the influx of new customers, diverting them towards competitors and putting a squeeze on Aliant’s profits. Considering the size of Aliant’s operations and the fact that it was still in the midst of restructuring, the strategy was by no means far-fetched. This would put enormous pressure on Aliant’s managers, who would have to “keep the lights on” as CEP President Brian Payne suggested (cited in Canadian Press 2004), for an estimated two million residential customers and 80,000 businesses across Atlantic Canada.

On April 23, 2004, pickets went up at Aliant locations across the four provinces. In Moncton, the newly unionized workers were facing the unknown: “90% of the people […] going out the door had no idea what a strike was, they’d never went on strike before” (Sandy Brideau interview). While the strike was mostly played out within the framework imposed by the Canadian Labour Code, it produced some very serious tensions across the Maritime provinces. In a tactic that would feature prominently in the Telus strike, Aliant employed private security guards to monitor and intimidate the striking workers:

We did get harassed quite a bit by the security guards. Several tactics, fear tactics, were used and stuff like that. So it was kind of rough, you know, they showed us our home address on a piece of paper, just to rub it in that we know where you live. They
delivered letters at my home about conduct and stuff, they were saying I was harassing people and all that which, you know, is kind of scary… (Aliant worker 3 interview)

Tension was high between strikers and the managers, who belonged to the same union but were in different bargaining units, meaning that the latter crossed picket lines to carry out the former’s work (Canadian Press 2004). Assault charges were laid against picketers in several locations as the hustle and bustle of strike activity soon took on an analogous life in the courts (Bouzane 2004a). Aliant and the CEP ended up in the Newfoundland Supreme Court in July, after a riot squad was called to the St. John’s Aliant headquarters three days earlier to watch over about 200 striking workers who were holding up management trying to enter the building (Ibid). Since work was being outsourced to replacement workers at other companies, and installations and repairs occurred across the city of Moncton, CEP strikers used roaming pickets at other locations: “People got in cars and looked for vans to picket. And then there was the Xwave parking lot, because they were doing our job” Buckley recalls (Karen Buckley interview).

An old staple of labour struggles, sabotage, also emerged through the spring and summer. In May an Aliant automated systems building in Holyrood, Newfoundland suffered fire and smoke damage to its exterior and an Aliant vehicle had its tires slashed (Bouzane 2004a). In June primary and backup cables in the Aliant network were severed, disrupting telephone, cellular and Internet services on the Avalon Peninsula and Corner Brook, Newfoundland. The tactic was employed that same month on the east coast of Nova Scotia (Bradbury Bennett 2004a).

As the strike hit the two-month mark, Department of Labour official and conciliation officer Murray Keans suggested that it had been “normal” thus far, and that there had not yet been any need to intervene (cited in Bouzane 2004c). The parties met in order to resume full contract
negotiations, but these exploratory talks between ended after two days with no further bargaining scheduled (Cronk and Macdonald 2004a). With strike pay offering little more than $200 per week (Bradbury Bennett 2004b), pressure grew on both the strikers and the union coffers. At the end of July national treasurer Andre Foucault stated that the CEP had spent roughly $3 million on the local union’s strike fund (Ibid). At roughly the same time the TWU contributed $1 million to the Halifax-based Atlantic Communication and Technical Workers' Union, an early sign that there were financial difficulties at the Nova Scotian organization.

When Bell Canada technicians in Ontario and Quebec accepted a contract their bargaining committee had advised them to reject in mid-August (one which fell short of CATU’s own bargaining objectives), it was likely an indication that they did not see things proceeding well in Atlantic Canada. Workers in Ontario and Quebec agreed to a contract that allowed outsourcing and Bell Canada’s pension plan demands. Their capitulation provoked a special member update from CATU’s bargaining team urging strikers at Aliant not to be discouraged by what had happened (Cronk and Macdonald 2004b).

Meanwhile, the call centre workers interviewed in Moncton overwhelmingly reported increased levels of politicization as the strike wore on. As Donovan Richard’s reflections show, this politicization was also enabled by the transmission of techniques of struggle from workers who had been through a strike already:

I remember before [the Aliant strike] we’d drive in front of places where we’d see people on strike, and we just didn’t know, or you didn’t attach yourself to these people because you just didn’t know what it was about. So you’re just like oh, they’re outside and they’re protesting against their employers for something. [...] But then when it turns around and we’re in a
strike, we’re actually right in the thick of it. Then we’re actually like oh, okay, so this is what it’s all about. It’s awkward at first, because we’ve never been in a strike, but we’re looking at the craft people that have been there before, like “what do we do, what’s going on…” And it was nice at that time, we had some people that were handling it that basically had been there in the eighties, that had seen it before, who could tell us that this is basically how it’s going to happen… (Donovan Richard interview)

By mid-summer the strike appeared to be cutting into Aliant’s bottom line. The company’s second-quarter financial results at the end of July revealed the strike had cost it in the area of $21 million, with a drop of $9 million in revenues and a $12 million increase in costs (CBC News 2004). Considering it was relieved of the burden of paying its unionized workers, these figures support the idea that Aliant was prepared to pay a hefty price for future control over its labour process. By the end of August, with the strike closing in on its fifth month, provincial Labour Minister Joe Fontana announced that a federal mediator would try to resolve the dispute. The parties met with Elizabeth MacPherson in Halifax on August 30th (Ryder 2004), and on September 3rd it was announced that a tentative agreement had been reached.

Not all was peaceful within the CATU alliance however. As its workers were reviewing the tentative deal, friction appeared to be developing between the CEP and the ACTWU. The Nova Scotia ACTWU members were far from happy with the Aliant offer. In particular, it appears as if they were dissatisfied with how long it would take them to reach wage parity with Aliant workers doing the same work in other provinces. Also, despite winning a no-layoff clause in the case of contracted-out work, the contract allowed union jobs to be awarded to external sources provided no employee was laid off (Bouzane 2004d). As the ratification of the agreement was pending, the CEP withdrew its support for the 1,800 Nova Scotia workers through its strike fund. "The CEP has really kicked us while we are down, our union brothers" ACTWU member Joel Crouse
lamented, "in my opinion, they are trying to force a yes vote" (cited in Halifax Chronicle-Herald 2004). Indeed with the ACTWU on the rocks financially, Nova Scotia workers were facing no strike pay if they rejected the tentative deal and continued striking. While some Nova Scotians may have felt the offer was the best they could get from the company, the sentiment of betrayal was apparently widespread. "It was [a] real blow," suggested Nova Scotia dispatcher Joan Ross: "My own personal feeling is I think we should be contacting the Auto Workers and Teamsters, and saying: 'we're here, take us.' And leave the CEP in the dust" (cited in McLaughlin 2004). CEP Local 410 president Tom Retieffe added his voice to the chorus: “The contracting-out language that we enjoyed for years in Newfoundland has been completely left out of the collective agreement and all we have now is basically a no-layoff clause that says as long as there's no one on layoff, the company can contract out any amount of work that they feel like” (cited in Bradley Bennett 2004c).

The new contract does not preclude the outsourcing of portions of the Aliant labour process to third parties. While unionized workers at Aliant are protected by a series of measures against layoffs, or “workforce reduction” as it is referred to in the collective agreement (Aliant and CATU 2004a), they may still be shifted around to other positions so long as they are unionized ones. In addition, once a unionized worker leaves or retires, their position does not have to be replaced with another unionized worker.

The five-month strike came to an end when workers at Aliant accepted the contract offer with a 76% Yes vote. The last act of the strike was the disappearance of the ACTWU, which in January of the following year, likely due to financial difficulties, opted to merge with the CEP. The strike
that began with corporate convergence thus ended with one more round of trade union convergence.

5.7 Post-Strike Restructuring: Outsourcing of Call Centre Jobs

With a collective agreement in place and employees back to work across the four provinces, Aliant immediately resumed its experiments in restructuring, albeit within the boundaries of the new collective agreement. That September the company announced the closure of a walk-in phone centre in St. John's (Vaccaro 2004). In November of the following year it announced it would outsource 129 permanent jobs (including technical support for dial-up Internet, high-speed Internet, telephone repair and mobility repair) from its call centres to a non-unionized company and drop around 100 temporary employees from the payroll (Tutton 2005). The positions, which were carried out at call centres in St. John's, Halifax and Moncton, were outsourced to ICT Group, whose two call centres in Miramichi already provided the help-desk service for a portion of Aliant's dial-up Internet customers (Ibid).

The company’s emergent strategy appears to be one of outsourcing its support work and keeping its sales work in-house. While the company must reassign the affected workers in the event their jobs are outsourced, for many of the clerical/call-centre workers in Moncton this has meant regular upheaval in their work as portions of it are spun off to other companies:

I was doing the technical support at first for the dialup portion of it, then they got me into high-speed, and then the company decided to move their dialup to a contractor. So we lost the dialup part that we were doing, and we were doing high speed up until now and now they outsourced the high speed as well. So all of the technical side has been outsourced. And they’re keeping the unionized force for service (Aliant worker 2).
For the call centre workers at Aliant, these ongoing experiments mean they face a kind of permanent uncertainty at work: “[Management’s] always telling us, 'you know, you guys can always be moved around to other trouble resolution groups’” says Donovan Richard (Donovan Richard interview). Ferdinand Leblanc sums up the precarity of their labour conditions: “you have a job, but not necessarily the job that you want to have.” Also, for those who remain in technical support, like Richard, greater amounts of work are being extracted from them than ever before: “Same workload, just less people” as he says (Donovan Richard interview).

In March of 2006 the company announced further restructuring in the formation of Bell Aliant. This entailed Bell taking over Atlantic Canada’s wireless operations and Bell Aliant now being responsible for the traditional wireline operations in Ontario and Quebec. According to Ervan Cronk, Bell is "hiving off the growth part of the company" and leaving the more imperiled portions of the company to Bell Aliant, and, as a result, to its unionized employees (cited in Tutton 2006). These experiments will likely continue the trend of job upheaval and losses within the Aliant laboratory. As one telecommunications analyst has suggested: "They're going to fracture the company and move employees around. Clearly some of the unionized employees will change unions, seniority is going to be affected and over time there will be attrition" (cited in Ibid). Bell’s move could therefore mean further union convergence as well. Bell Aliant will take over management of 750 unionized employees in rural Ontario and Quebec, represented by three separate unions, including the CEP, the Canadian Telephone Employees Association and the Teamsters.

Overall, Bell Aliant’s strategy towards its union appears clear. While for the moment it must keep on unionized positions, over the long-term it will be able to reduce the union’s presence
steadily through the attrition of retirements and people leaving their jobs. Donovan Richard captures the feeling this strategy evokes: “So you see, our department got smaller, and they don’t replace people, they just let it go smaller and go smaller until at one point there won’t be anybody left” (Donovan Richard interview). One of the last questions I asked the interviewees was how secure they felt their positions to be. While responses were not completely unanimous, most employees felt like Dina Gallant-Valtour: “Not secure at all,” she suggested. Despite their collective agreement, she says, “Anybody can fall” (Dina Gallant-Valtour interview).

5.8 Convergence and Memory of Struggle in the Aliant Laboratory

Well, there is a union culture in different industries and outside work is known more to be unionized. Clerical, you never heard of a call centre being unionized… (Philippe Roy interview)

Workers belonging to unions emerging from the once public monopoly-dominated telecommunications sector are facing privatized and convergent companies across North America. The second case study in this dissertation is one in which the Aliant workers in Atlantic Canada are organizing through the parallel logic of convergent trade unionism in a bid to harness industry convergence and use it as a sort of boomerang against their employer. The case of Aliant knowledge workers animating a form of collective organization in which merged unions are rising to prominence in the wake of merged companies is just one example of the multiple forms through which the recomposition of immaterial labour is occurring within post-Fordist capital. Like the WashTech permatemps forming an open-source union for high-tech workers, the Aliant strike offers a moment whereby digital labour is seizing upon existing tendencies within the immaterial sector of the economy in the invention of its forms of resistance.
The organizational form of convergent unionism is the response by established North American unions such as the CEP and the CWA to what are deeply uncertain times for their members. Workers labouring for the new continental oligopolies like Sprint, Bell, Telus, and Aliant are facing serious challenges due to the steady implementation of labour flexibility by their employers. The most serious threat for workers at these companies is the potential elimination of their positions or their outsourcing to non-unionized businesses elsewhere in the region, or across national borders.

The particularity of the form and context of each case of collective organization examined in these inquiries is important. In this case, New Brunswick’s specific route to political-economic restructuring and the unique composition of its labour force (culturally, linguistically, politically and economically) are moments of difference that distinguish the case, and therefore ones that create difficulties for those aiming to generalize the analysis to other cases. This notwithstanding, there is a growing body of inquiry into similar cases of convergent labour organization by knowledge workers. In particular, the aforementioned struggles between Telus and the TWU, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the CWA, and the CEP and Bell Canada that occurred over 2004 and 2005 were key moments of the broader cycle of struggles that marked the rapidly shifting Canadian media and telecommunications landscape during this period (Niemeijer 2004, Shniad 2005 and 2007, Mosco and McKercher 2006). Albeit to different degrees and as a result of different forces, all of these cases involve the application of convergent unionism in the media and telecommunications sector, and therefore the analyses of these struggles offer points for comparison, reflection, and cautious extrapolation.
In their analysis of the CBC-CWA and TWU-Telus disputes, Mosco and McKercher (2006) conclude that the former case demonstrates convergence can “bite back” at companies when they are faced with the convergent unions created in their wake. They also make the point, however, that labour convergence does not in and of itself guarantee success at the bargaining table (Ibid, 748). Indeed the outcomes have been mixed. On the one hand, the CWA’s marshalling of the cultural capital enjoyed by the more popular CBC knowledge workers and its leveraging the damaging loss of revenue that would have been the result of losing the National Hockey League season resulted in severely curtailing the broadcaster’s plans to impose more flexibility on its workforce. On the other hand, in the Telus-TWU dispute the differences in the type of service offered, the greater ability on the part of the company to outsource the production of this service, and the fact that Telus is a private sector company all played a part in the TWU’s acceptance of a contract that a sizable portion of its workers were disappointed by.

As TWU researcher and labour activist Sid Shniad (2005) suggests,

> During two weeks of brutal bargaining, the bargaining committee succeeded in modifying some of the worst aspects of the original Telus deal. It secured improved benefits, protected the pension plan, and ensured that union members would do the work on Telus's planned internet-based TV. But the reality cannot be sugar-coated: the union suffered a major setback, losing the powerful contract language that it had secured in decades of struggle against BC Tel.

In particular, the TWU lost the strong contract language around outsourcing that its members had enjoyed during the BC Tel years. Both Shniad (2007) and Niemeijer (2004) arrive at sombre conclusions regarding the defeat of convergent unions by their telecommunications companies, attempting to extract lessons from these struggles for the future.
My research adds itself to, and broadly supports, these findings. It also suggests there may be further distinctions to be made among the cases in which convergent unionism is being adopted. While far from an unmitigated failure, the Aliant case offers an example of the problems faced by convergent unions challenging the “continental oligopolies” such as Telus and Bell that have emerged within the post-Fordist telecommunications sector. If union convergence worked for the CWA during its strike against a public broadcaster, it has, thus far, not had the same degree of success in beating back the flexibility pursued by the new private telecom behemoths. The case of the CEP-Aliant dispute, therefore, suggests that convergent trade unionism, while capable of producing victories in particular settings of immaterial production, does not guarantee effectiveness when pursued in others.

Why is this the case though? In the Aliant strike, having a bigger union confront a bigger employer produced advantages, including a larger strike fund and a more coherent bargaining position. In addition, contract language was achieved limiting the outsourcing of work, meaning that unionized Aliant workers whose job is contracted out must be relocated to another position within the company, and thus have some degree of labour security. On pensions, too, losses were limited, as Aliant workers retained access to the Defined Benefit plan. These factors are positive outcomes, yet the unionized workers in those positions most vulnerable to outsourcing (the clerical/call centre positions above all) remain subject to the steady erosion of their positions, continual upheaval in their jobs, and a precarity caused by the fact that any security they currently have hangs on the next round of bargaining with the company:

[My job is] absolutely secure until December 31st 2007, until our contract ends. After that… I don’t feel the job security will be that high because they’re contracting out everything, so… If it’s a strike vote, if we go back on strike… everything is basically contracted out now, so a lot of the, I wouldn’t say core services
but, what’s important to the customer, you know, frontline jobs, are mostly contracted out, so… (Aliant worker 1 interview).

Like this worker, some of the CEP interviewees who believe that they won the strike also note they are “saving up” for the next round of negotiations and another likely confrontation, that they have no idea what job they are going to be carrying out at the company next year, and that management seems to be perfecting its outsourcing of fractal portions of the customer and tech support services Aliant provides via third-party non-union call centres. This offers Aliant a chance to keep these services running during a strike that the CBC management simply does not have when it is trying to produce the evening news without Peter Mansbridge.

Yet the problem the Aliant strike raises is perhaps not one of union convergence in itself as an organizational form, but rather the way in which it is being understood and applied. The CEP, despite harnessing the processes of convergence that is currently being unleashed within the telecommunications industry, remains strongly premised on the kind of firm-level, Fordist form of collective bargaining whose material basis is eroding due to the onslaughts of neoliberalism and its associated post-Fordist restructuring (Cobble 1996, Cranford et al 2006a, 2006b, Vosko 2006). This may explain why the strategy (knowledge worker union convergence and firm-level bargaining) worked well for the CWA at the CBC, a company which, despite itself, arguably remains structured a lot more like the public telecommunications companies the unions used to confront. To put it simply, whereas in that strike the CBC was aiming to become more flexible, companies like Telus, Bell and Aliant, to a great extent, already are.

\[48\] Indeed when we consider convergent trade unionism as a mode of organization there are a range of varieties existing between the “One Big Union” idea championed by the Industrial Workers of the World a century ago, premised as it was on a revolutionary solidarity across all capitalist industries, and the kind of Fordist convergent trade unionism practiced by the CEP.
If convergent unionism in itself is not necessarily the problem, what are the ways in which the model runs into difficulties as applied in this particular case? To answer this question, I would like to return to the changes enacted upon the labour process of the Aliant clerical/call centre workers. As suggested above, portions of their labour process have steadily become more like those of the private, non-unionized call centres dotting New Brunswick. Several moments of the labour process, including most of the technical support offered by Aliant, have then been outsourced to these call centres. Given that Aliant management has had ample time to experiment with these changes and therefore that this process is quite advanced, at the very least it means that unions like the CEP have a weakened bargaining position because of their low presence in the call centre industry as a whole, which offers an ample basin of labour for the electronically transferred replacement work during a strike. Indeed there is a strong argument to be made that, given the potential for technological transfer that is allowing companies like Aliant and Telus to get through strike action relatively unscathed, as long as call centre workers in the rest of the province are not organized, the clerical workers interviewed for this chapter will remain deeply vulnerable to outsourcing.

The combination of the increasing potential for rapid outsourcing and the low union density characterizing the Canadian call centre sector means that the firm-by-firm organizing that characterized Fordism is increasingly vulnerable in a regional and global economy. As has been suggested by numerous scholars and activists attempting to critique, fashion, invent and refine forms of labour organization, unions must adopt strategies to organize geographically, by industry, by occupation, and across intermittent periods of employment if they are to strike back at employers in a particular sector, city or region (Cranford et al 2006a, Fine 2006a, 2006b).
Such approaches would benefit from the adoption and promotion of a “social movement” unionism (Moody 1997) operating on the basis of constituency (call centre workers) or location (Moncton) as opposed to a particular company or worksite. One example of how this has occurred is through the establishment of worker centres, a promising strategy that is being employed across North America (Fine 2006a, Cranford et al 2006b, Tait 2005). Worker centres are established in communities and act as resources, spaces for organizing, and skills-sharing centres for workers in that community. In a city like Moncton, it is not difficult to see how a worker centre aimed specifically at call centre workers (funded by unions such as the CEP), might be the first step towards galvanizing the workforce and therefore addressing the gaps in the union’s firm-by-firm Fordist approach. Efforts such as these are commonly described as "community unionism", or forms of collective organization among workers in low-wage jobs occupying a space between community activism and established trade unionism.

This is not all however. As we saw in the previous chapter on WashTech (where there is similarly almost no union presence among high-tech workers), workers, academics, and trade unionists who nurse dreams of call centre revolt must begin to pay serious attention not only to the “technical” composition of the labour force they aim to organize (age, gender, relative routinization of their labour process, precarity of their labour, etc), but also to these workers’ attitudes and dispositions, their feelings towards the company they work for, towards trade unions, towards labour conflict in general. As Philippe Roy’s comments at the beginning of this section indicate, unions are something new to workers who have moved from the non-unionized call centre frontier to positions with Aliant and membership in the CEP. Zeroing on the attitudes of these workers offers vital insights into the challenges faced by would-be organizers of immaterial labour.
By all accounts, and considering the composition of call-centre labour in New Brunswick, there is frequently little or no experience of labour struggle and collective organization lying dormant within the ranks of contemporary private call centre labour. As one Aliant worker suggests: [M]ost of the people going into call centres are people finishing college, university or high school… so the only people who would probably have a history background with union people would have to be people that have parents that work in the mill, or at the mine, or something like that (Donovan Richard Interview).

What are conditions of a generation of Atlantic Canadian call centre workers with little or no memory of struggle to draw upon? One of the Aliant workers explains why they think younger workers in Moncton allow themselves to be exploited so ruthlessly in call centres:

It’s a lot of naiveness. I find that people aren’t aware, and most of the people never worked for a union before, as was the case for me, I was 19 coming out of college, don’t know much about the world, and you know. So it’s kind of taking advantage of people not knowing what there is out there, and the same things are going through with Xwave and Clientlogic right now, which are little branches of our own companies, just down the street (Aliant worker 3 interview).

If a collective memory of struggle and its organization is not present or is faint in a particular situation, it does not mean that there will or can be no struggle. As we just saw, the droves of new immaterial labourers working at Microsoft were deeply ambivalent politically, and yet they banded together and developed a form of trade unionism that haunts the American tech sector. And as we shall see in the next chapter, the Roman call centre workers who forced the state into regulating the conditions of call centre employment in that country were by their own accounts mostly politically apathetic upon entering the largest call factory in Europe.
The 2004 standoff between the CEP and Aliant offers a case in which knowledge workers in a converged telecommunications industry adopted an equally convergent trade unionism as an organizational model. Convergent trade union organization can certainly seize upon existing tendencies within this sector to its own advantage, but, as applied in this case, is also capable of being routed around by a flexible and converged telecommunications company such as Aliant.

This case study highlights the importance of the electronic transfer of knowledge work, especially to non-unionized call centres, within the outcome of such struggles. In the case of the CEP and the Atlantic call centre industry in particular, this case illustrates the vulnerabilities that were produced for the CEP as a result of remaining lodged within the company-by-company, Fordist model of unionism, especially when faced with an ample basin of non-unionized and politically ambivalent labour on offer in the Atlantic provinces. For burgeoning organizational forms adopted by knowledge workers therefore, bigger does not necessarily mean better, at least if it is not paired with truly industry and region-wide strategies. As the CEP-Aliant case seems to suggest, responding to moves by employers effectively may also benefit from developing forms of collective organization for immaterial labour that organize by industry, profession, or locality.

The workers at the Roman call centre Atesia examined in the next chapter combined some of these elements in their organizing, offering another example of the recompositions occurring within contemporary immaterial labour.
Chapter 6
The Struggles at Atesia

Atesia, located in the southern periphery of Rome, Italy, is the largest call centre in Europe. Employing over 4000 operators, the centre can handle 300,000 calls a day and runs around the clock, 365 days a year (Atesia 2007). By the early years of this decade, the workers examined in this chapter found themselves at the centre of a perfect storm produced by the privatization of public institutions, the outsourcing of portions of the production process, the radical imposition of workforce flexibility, and juridical barriers to collective organizing.

The case of the Collettivo Precari Atesia (CPA) offers this dissertation its third organizational form, that of self-organization. By self-organization I mean forms of labour organization that are generally enacted outside the boundaries of established trade unionism, that work against the latter’s hierarchies, and tend to see themselves as both working for the improvement of their own immediate labour conditions and a part of activist movements working for broader social change. In other words, self-organization is a form of what Kim Moody has described as “social movement” unionism (1997). As discussed in the next chapter, this type of organization is particular in that it cuts across, and exists within, most collective organization, becoming stronger or fading away depending on the context. In the WashTech case for example, the group was self-organized at its inception before entering into a novel yet dependent relationship with the Communication Workers of America. The case of the Collettivo Precari Atesia offers a much clearer example of self-organization by workers in that the group self-consciously adopted the model through the duration of its struggles at Atesia.
In order to better understand the choice made by the CPA, this chapter begins with a look at recent Italian twentieth century history so as to pick up the emergence of defining tensions and lines of force over thirty years ago, in a time of rupture and transition. In doing so, the chapter surveys the recent history of the labour movement and the increasing flexibilization of the Italian labour market during the 1990s. The chapter moves on to examine the rapid growth of the call centre sector in Italy, as well as the composition of call centre labour that has been produced as a result. Having established this context, the labour conditions at Atesia are explored, ones that led to the development of the Collettivo PrecariAtesia. The chapter recounts the struggles of the latter from 2004 to 2007, and concludes by offering some preliminary reflection on the model of self-organization and the results of the Collettivo’s efforts.

6.1 Italian Labour Law, Trade Unions, and Labour Precarity

Like the United States and Canada, Italy has for decades been restructuring towards its own version of post-Fordism. A history of the present, of the country’s path towards a flexible economy and the idiosyncrasies of this passage, must include the wave of unrest that shook the country to its political, economic and cultural foundations during the “Red Decade,” 1968-1977. As Italy rapidly moved from a largely agrarian society in the post-World War II period to a Fordist one, labour struggles broke out like wildfire among workers in virtually every economic sector, but most markedly in the rapidly industrializing north of the country.
It is beyond the scope of this chapter to give a careful account of these struggles, but one feature of them in particular would turn out to be a vital ingredient in the revolt of the Atesia call centre workers at the beginning of the 21st century: a defining force of the decennio rosso was the heterogeneous political area that developed to the left of the Partito Comunista Italiano (the Italian Communist Party, or PCI) and the country’s established trade unions (Berardi 1998, Castellano et al 1996, Wright 2002, Persichetti and Scalzone 1999). The extraparliamentary left developed a powerful critique of the PCI and the confederal trade unions that had dominated the post-war period: the CGIL, the Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori (Italian Confederation of Workers’ Unions, or CISL) and the Unione Italiana del Lavoro (Union of Italian Workers, or UIL). These warhorses of Italian labour were, during the 1960s, subjected to harsh criticism of their established hierarchies and attempts to suppress more radical rank and file organization. During the “Hot Autumn” of 1969 wildcat strikes crippled the country, forcing the confederal unions and the PCI to “ride the tiger” of shop floor militancy.

As relative labour peace returned, the following year saw the passage of a defining piece of legislation, the Statuto dei Lavoratori (Worker Statute). This set of laws, which would govern capital-labour relations for more than a quarter century thereafter, contained a series of concessions by the state in the face of the ferocity of the recent labour unrest, including freedom of association for all workers and protection against dismissal without just cause. The law also laid the foundation for a new pension contribution system, stipulating that the equivalent of 33% of a worker’s earnings was to be contributed towards their pension by the employer. The

49 The CGIL is the oldest and largest Italian union, which has existed since 1906. The CISL and the UIL both broke off from the confederation in the immediate post-war period in order to vindicate their catholic and social-democratic/republican roots, respectively.
legislation cemented a typically Fordist contractual relationship. Under it, the “subordinate” worker (the permanent, full-time worker, or “lavoratore subordinato”) became central to the Italian labour market. According to the Statuto, the defining characteristic of this worker was that, not owning the tools of production, his or her labour was a source of profit for the company.

In Italy companies have traditionally been subject to centralized collective bargaining via national agreements signed for individual sectors (such as metal-mechanics, petrochemical, telecommunications, etc). Much like the 1935 Wagner Act passed in the United States, the Statuto was a means by which the institutional role of the established Italian trade unions in collective bargaining on behalf of Italian workers was bolstered and protected by the Italian state. The legislation enshrined a series of mechanisms aimed at ensuring the CGIL, CISL and UIL would remain the private sector’s only interlocutors in any labour negotiation. While not a majoritarian tendency by any means, extraparliamentary groups (among these Lotta Continua and Potere Operaio), often bolstered by students, had been establishing a presence at companies in the Italian industrial north, especially at FIAT and in the petrochemical sector (Wright 2002). Despite the contestation the confederal trade unions were subject to during this period, they were at the peak of their power in terms of both numbers and strength. Unionization rates, on the heels of strikes that were being fought and won across the peninsula, doubled between 1967 and 1977, from 27 to 51 percent (Carrieri 1996, 295, Ginsborg 1990, 320). In July 1972 the three trade unions signed a pact giving birth to the CGIL-CISL-UIL federation which, if not a return to the unity of the birth of the historic Confederazione Generale del Lavoro (General Confederation of Labour, or CGL) in 1906, demonstrated a willingness to work together, and, more importantly cemented a consolidated political direction for the “triplice.” When combined with the
legitimacy afforded by the Statuto, the agreement would cement the hegemony of the Italian trade
unions within the sphere of collective organization for the next forty years.

Forced to respond to the succession of spontaneous revolts on the shop floor, the confederal unions incorporated changes to the lowest reaches of their structure, where the representativeness of the old system of internal commissions had been subject to harsh critique. First the CGIL, and subsequently CISL and UIL instituted a new system of worker representation in 1970-1971 known as the “consigli di fabbrica” (factory councils), which replaced the post-war system. According to this system delegates for every shop or department in the workplace would now be elected by secret ballot of all workers, not just union members.

Yet as Italian capital began restructuring towards its own version of post-Fordism, established trade unions entered a period of crisis. There began a period of membership decline for the confederals, one that highlighted some ominous generational trends in their support. Although they still boasted impressive membership numbers even by the standards of other European countries, by the 1980s the major unions were by most accounts “top-heavy and poorly oiled machines, with membership declining and ageing at the same time” (Ginsborg 2001, 57). By 1990, the CGIL had 2 million pensioners out of a total of 5 million members (Ibid).

50 For an anecdotal account of the autonomous rank and file action of the era, and the violent critique of unions such as the CGIL on the FIAT shop floor in Turin, see Balestrini, Nanni (1974).
In addition to this, during the 1980s a generation of activists forged in the 1970s began to form their own rank and file sectional trade unions as an organizational response to what they saw as the overly comfortable relationship that had developed between the confederal unions, capital, and the state. Among these, the COBAS (which emerged in the public sector as many of the radicals became teachers) challenged the confederais by organizing amid old and new sectors of the workforce, eschewing the professionalization of trade unionism and employing direct action tactics such as occupations and wildcat strikes. Indeed despite their hegemony within the Italian labour movement, the history of the confederal unions during the 1980s and 1990s is one of deep disarray. As their material base of support eroded thanks to automation, outsourcing, and deindustrialization, they returned to fighting amongst themselves. Worst of all, rank and file critique became resurgent, peaking again during what is referred to as the “stagione dei bulloni”, (literally “the season of bolts”), with which the trade union leaders were pelted during public encounters with workers in the first half of the 1990s.

In 1993 the confederal unions instituted the rappresentanze sindacali unitarie (unitary trade-union representatives, or RSU), a system of plant-level union representation that replaced the contested factory councils, which were by that point were steadily declining in their power to intervene in the struggle for control of the labour process. Representatives on the RSUs are now elected directly by workers, but in a manner that has intensified rather than addressed criticisms from the rank and file. Under the current system, 33% of the votes are, a priori, allotted to and divided among the trade unions that sign national contracts for the sector (almost exclusively CGIL, CISL and UIL), with the remaining two thirds being freely voted in by workers. This system of shop-floor representation means that even by gaining a majority of votes cast, Cobas and other rival unions cannot achieve a majority within the RSU at a given workplace. Given the
predominance of centralized bargaining in Italy, the RSUs’ power is in any case quite limited: second-tier, or plant-level collective bargaining occurs between the owners on one side and the RSU and the signatories of the national contract on the other, meaning that CGIL, CISL and UIL de facto cannot be excluded from the bargaining table, at least by workers. The employer, on the other hand, can choose who it wants to negotiate with, meaning it can exclude one of the unions from bargaining by signing a separate agreement if it wishes. While this is a rare occurrence for the big three unions, it regularly sidelines rank and file unions from collective bargaining.

A key reason for the decline of the major trade unions has been the rapidly shifting context of the labour-capital relationship in the country. As the Italian economy has been progressively restructured towards flexible forms of accumulation, subordinate work as the dominant contractual relationship enjoyed by the vast majority of workers has begun to erode since the late 1970s. It has been steadily replaced by a variety of contractual agreements ranging all the way to “lavoro autonomo”, or freelance work. As economist Andrea Fumagalli (1997) has pointed out, this has resulted in a constantly expanding “grey zone” of “parasubordinate” employment existing between full-time, permanent subordinate work on the one hand and freelance work on the other. These types of contracts are not bound by the national agreements hammered out by the confederal unions, but instead allow for “free” compensation to be determined by workers and employers on a case-by-case basis in order to allow for greater flexibility for the company. In theory, this is because parasubordinate workers are in the gratifying position of having the freedom to make their own price for providing a service. In practice, as we shall see, it means parasubordinate workers are effectively excluded from union representation. In the rest of this section I briefly outline the primary types of employment relationships that have been engineered
into the post-Fordist Italian labour market so as to offer a context for the way they have been applied within the call centre industry.

Within the boundaries of subordinate work, two types of employment contracts are possible. Subordinate contracts can be “a tempo indeterminato”, that is, permanent, or “a tempo determinato”, meaning the worker is hired on full-time, but for a specified period of time. A growing percentage of subordinate employment is of the latter variety. Moving outward from subordinate employment into the “grey zone” described by Fumagalli, a steady parade of different contractual relationships has been produced by reforms to Italian labour law over the past 15-20 years.

So-called “lavoro autonomo”, that is “freelance” or “autonomous” work, can take several forms. The first kind is known as a “partita iva” contractual relationship, whereby the employer pays the worker who is then responsible for paying her own taxes to the state (IVA stands for “Imposta sul Valore Aggiunto,” or the taxes one pays). This employment relationship presents some important differences from subordinate forms of work – most importantly, the employer cannot oblige the worker to work specific hours. In addition, it assumes that it is the worker who owns the tools of production and that the employer pays them for the completion of a particular task – something like when a company pays a graphic designer to create a webpage on her laptop from home.

By the mid-1990s a growing subset of Italian employers began, quite ingeniously, to use “parasubordinate” contracts as a solution to their search for workforce flexibility, lower wages,
and less union interference. Particularly in newer, less regulated sectors with low union presence (such as call centres), but also in the public sector, the use of “collaborazione coordinata e continuativa” contracts (coordinated and continuing collaborative contract, or co.co.co) rose sharply. As opposed to subordinate employment, where her hours are subject to the needs of the employer, this kind of worker is in theory only “coordinated,” a term which implies a gentler form of command over her labour. The relationship is “continuing” because, as opposed to the partita iva or the full freelance contract, it does not require a precise task to be performed within the duration of the contract. This kind of parasubordinate contract, under which the worker was an employee of the company but remained similar to a freelance worker in many ways, had existed since the 1970s, but began to be applied by employers in the mid-nineties due to the reform of the Italian pension system. The 1995 Dini Reform created a separate fund for pension payments flowing from the work carried out under this kind of contract. Employers using these co.co.co contracts had much less onerous (10-12%) contributions to make, and a hefty part of the overall contribution was to be paid by the worker herself.

The centre-left government brought about the “rapporto interinale,” or temporary employment relationship, in 1997. Introduced as a part of the Pacchetto Treu (or Legge 196), the rapporto interinale enshrined third-party employment contracts through temporary employment agencies.

The most recent expansion of the parasubordinate grey zone within the labour market came in 2003, when Silvio Berlusconi’s centre-right government passed the Legge 30. Also referred to as the Legge Biagi (after Marco Biagi, the economist assassinated by the Red Brigades in 2002), this

51 The subsequent centre-left government raised it to 23%.
legislation did away with co.co.co contracts in order to end their widespread fraudulent application. These types of contracts were replaced by the so-called “contratto a progetto” (per-project contract, or co.co.pro). As opposed to their progenitor, these contracts outline the one-time performance of a precisely defined job and require payment in one lump sum upon delivery. Similarly to the co.co.co contract however, the worker is considered to be a professional, meaning compensation remains “free,” national contracts do not apply, and union representation is excluded. As we shall see, this has allowed a situation in call centres where workers can be paid by the phone call, by the length of a phone call, or by the number of sales made to a customer, all of which recall the piecework system of a century ago. In addition to not providing vacation, maternity leave, or sick days, illness and pregnancy are causes for the termination of this type of contract.

As this succession of contractual relationships ate away at the subordinate employment relationship that once defined the composition of Italian labour, the period also saw the rapid growth of a new industry: call centres.

6.2 Atesia and the Composition of Italian Call Centre Labour

Recent estimates suggest that in Italy, with a population of almost 60 million, roughly 2000 call centres employ 250,000-400,000 people (Antonio Sciotto interview, Cugusi 2005, 50, Direttivo CGIL del Lazio et al 2006). The number of Italian call centres is believed to be growing faster than in most European nations, bringing it closer to Ireland and the Netherlands, where one out of three new jobs now involves talking over a headset (Datamonitor, cited in Cugusi 2005, 50). The spatial distribution of call centres follows a pattern of agglomeration in and around the country’s
largest cities (over half are in or close to Rome and Milan), where (as in New Brunswick) there is an educated workforce and higher rates of unemployment. There is also a heavier concentration of call centres in the south of the country, where entrepreneurs can access state development subsidies.

_Il Manifesto_ journalist Antonio Sciotto, who has been following the labour struggles in the sector very closely, describes how current and recently graduated university students provide the perfect reservoir of the linguistic and affective capacities demanded by the call centre industry, much as previous generations provided a supply of factory labour to industrial regions in the north during the post-war era:

> These people are good for call centre companies, because they are in any case people who have studied, and therefore they are able to learn the ropes at a call centre quickly, they know how to be pleasant, they are articulate. So it’s not like you’re taking the peasant during the industrial revolution and putting him in a factory where there isn’t any need for him to speak… [The call centre worker] has a capacity for relating to others (Antonio Sciotto interview).

The growth of call centres in Italy is determined by a number of factors, including the privatization of telecommunications monopoly SIP (now Telecom Italia), the exponential growth of mobile telephony in the country, and the increasing requirement for companies to develop customer “management” practices. In Atesia’s home region of Lazio, employment in the sector more than doubled between 2000 and 2004, from an estimated 16,350 workers to just under 40,000 (Partito di Rifondazione Comunista, cited in Cugusi 2005, 57).

While 45% of these workers are under 29 years of age, the average age of 31 belies the persistent image of the profession being entirely made up of younger people. While many are
hired on during their university years, call centres increasingly employ workers from across the social spectrum. Some data concerning the gendered composition of Italian call centre work is offered by the Partito di Rifondazione Comunista study, in which anonymous questionnaires were distributed to thousands of call centre workers, producing an overall sample of around 5,000. 73% of respondents were women, a figure that corroborates extensive anecdotal reports of the largely female composition of the industry’s workforce. As we shall see, an important category in the Italian call centre labour force is married women who add a day shift to their domestic work in order to contribute to the family income.

Call centres can be divided into two types: in-house, or those that are a part of the original company they operate on behalf of, or outsourced, meaning they are owned by a third party to whom the customer pays a fee in order to have their call centre needs taken care of. A further distinction to be made, and one that will turn out to be an important one for the contradictory position on call centre work adopted by Romano Prodi’s centre-left government, is whether the work performed within call centres is “inbound” (call centre workers receive calls, generally for customer assistance) or “outbound” (call centre workers make calls, typically to offer services). Labour conditions vary greatly between in-house and outsourced call centres.

Wireless operators such as Vodafone and Telecom Italia Mobile (TIM) have portions of their call centre requirements carried out in-house, where workers are protected by nationally binding collective agreements. This in-house portion of call centre work is a dwindling legacy of the workforces that pre-date the rapid growth of the outsourced call centre industry in the mid-1990s, and remains at risk of being outsourced. One example of this is the Italian wireless company Wind, which has an in-house call centre in Milan employing 270 people or so. In November of
2006 Weather Investments, a fund under the control of the Egyptian entrepreneur Naguib Sawiris, purchased the company. Sawiris immediately expressed his concern over what he saw as its high labour costs, particularly at the in-house call centre portion of its operations. Call centre workers at Wind were employed on subordinate contracts governed by the national telecommunications sector collective agreement, working 8 hours a day and making around 1000 Euros a month after taxes. Wind promptly sold their centre to the call centre contractor Omnia. While the new Omnia workers by law maintain their previous contract, they are now much more vulnerable to layoffs. Since Omnia works on contract, management can apply to lay off workers claiming the company will not get new contracts because its labour costs are too high. Even for in-house call centre workers, labour insecurity is only one market transaction away.

The landscape of outsourced call centres offers a different panorama, ranging from permanent insecurity to the most abrasive conditions of flexible labour. Workers employed here are much more vulnerable to their employers. Many of the same companies with limited in-house operations outsource a good deal of their work to call centre businesses, and these companies have employed workers on all of the precarious contracts outlined above. Estimates for the number of workers employed in this sub-sector vary. Umberto Costamagna, President of Asso Contact (the Industry association of outsourced call centres) and owner of Call&Call, (which employs 1200 call centre workers across Italy) recently suggested that roughly 80,000 Italians

52 These are referred to as “licenziamenti collettivi,” and in such situations Italian labour law dictates how these layoffs must happen. The company must agree with the union on the number of people to be let go and come to agreements as to criteria by which these will be chosen, including length of service, age, how many dependents a person has, etc, after which an agreement is signed. Often the state, in these cases, will take on the costs of a worker’s remaining pension contributions in order to ease the impact on the individual workers.
work in outsourced centres. Of this figure, three quarters are on parasubordinate contracts and there is an even split between outbound and inbound workers (cited in Sciotto 2007). There is some disagreement on this figure however, since Claudio Cugusi (who however also counts call centre workers that are listed with temporary employment agencies but currently unemployed in his total figure of 400,000 call centre workers in Italy) suggests that outsourced call centres are the dominant form of employment in the sector (2005, 23).

Other factors would suggest that Cugusi’s estimate, while presenting some obvious empirical difficulties, is likely closer to truth. Chief among these is the allegedly high number of call centre workers who labour in the shadows of the Italian digital economy, that is, call centre workers without a contract (Antonio Sciotto interview). As Cugusi (2005, 44) points out, with the cost of information technology dropping so rapidly, thirty thousand euros and a rented apartment are sufficient for the entry-level call centre entrepreneur to set up shop in any urban centre. In the thick ecosystem of contracting out fractal parts of the customer management process, tiny companies employing less than ten workers in an apartment may receive a contract two or three tiers downstream for answering Telecom Italia customer assistance calls. These workers are the digital equivalent of maquiladora workers making garments in Mexico or the Philippines, yet they labour at the heart of the information society. With no contract and no union representation, they are the most vulnerable call centre workers of all.

6.3 Atesia: Factory of Precarity

Our operators are, in fact, veritable Telephone Communication Professionals who speak the language of business and are motivated to manage the relationship with clients both competently and courteously. (Atesia website)
Against this backdrop of the explosive growth of call centre work and the increasing insecurity of Italian labour more generally, one call centre, located in the Cinecittà2 commercial centre in southern Rome, has become the negative symbol of the jobs post-Fordism can produce. Atesia emerged from the great privatizations of Italian public institutions during the 1980s and 1990s. Founded for the purposes of conducting market research in 1989 within STET (Società Torinese Esercizi Telefonici, the public telecommunications holding company that is the ancestor to Telecom),53 with around 100 employees Atesia was an obscure part of the byzantine Italian public sector apparatus that had developed over the course of the 20th century.

Yet in the first of a few strange twists in the Atesia story, centre-left Prime Minister Romano Prodi was at that time head of IRI (the Italian public holding company of which STET was a part) and a key player in the privatization of Italian public companies. Telecom Italia was founded in 1994 through the merger of several communications-related public sector companies (Iritel, Telespazio, Italcable, and Sirm) into the wireline operator SIP (Società Idroelettrica Piemonte). Privatized in 1997 as Telecom Italia, the company was incorporated into STET, which took on the Telecom Italia name for the new telecommunications giant.

Amid this maelstrom of mergers and privatizations, Atesia began its transformation towards other call centre service functions beyond market research. It began with contracts from its parent company Telecom. Like Aliant however, Atesia would become a post-Fordist laboratory, in this case for the experimental application of the broad typology of parasubordinate contracts

53 STET was itself a part of the historical Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale, or IRI, a holding company for the Italian government that had been created in 1933 in order to respond to (Footnote continues on following page)
discussed above. Indeed according to Domenico Teramo, a Telecom worker of 25 years and Cobas trade unionist, the kinds of contracts applied at Atesia were subsequently applied in the hundreds of private call centres that grew “like mushrooms” in the 1990s (Domenico Teramo interview). This combination of elements ensured that Atesia workers would become unwitting bellwethers for the imposition of extreme labour flexibility within the call centre industry.

In Atesia’s early days workers were put on partita iva contracts, according to which they had to rent a space at the call centre for a chance to access the piecework remuneration offered. In this way, similarly to the situation of the permatemps at Microsoft, Atesia masked the fact it was employing people in a manner that was fully consistent with subordinate work, since they were able to point to the fact that workers rented their tools as proof of their freelance status. The clients these operators answered the phones for were all Atesia’s though, and their working schedules were still established by management.

Not surprisingly, Atesia drew the attention of Cobas during the 1990s. Foreshadowing the events of ten years later, in 1996 SULTA (the Sindacato Unitario Lavoratori Transporto Aereo, or United Air Transport Workers’ Trade Union) requested that the Work Inspectorate review the company to ascertain whether their condition was indeed masked subordinate work. In 1999 the fallout from the Great Depression.

54 Atesia had been answering the phones for the airline company Alitalia.
Inspectorate’s report declared the contractual relationships at Atesia to be illegal. The report also drew the attention, and more or less ongoing presence, of the confederal unions at Atesia.\textsuperscript{35}

The arrival of the confederals inaugurated a paradoxical situation at Atesia that would last for years and generate acrid debates. While the confederal unions were technically unable to represent these “freelance” workers, they nonetheless bargained with the employer on the workers’ behalf and signed contracts for them beginning in 2000. While the new contract eliminated the partita iva contracts for these workers, it also sentenced their passage to co.co.co. contracts, cementing a slightly different contractual relationship, but a very familiar kind of precarity. In addition, in order to continue working at Atesia workers were also forced to sign an agreement to waive the right to seek compensation for past misclassification. As many of the interviewees suggested, if Atesia workers were freelancers, then why were the confederals striking bargains for them? If instead they were subordinate workers masked as freelance ones, then why were unions condemning them to these precarious contracts?

The agreement struck between the confederals and Atesia in 2000 began the restructuring that would culminate four years later with the splitting up and sale of a portion of Atesia. On the shop

\textsuperscript{35} Faced with the transformed composition of Italian labour, the confederals have attempted to renew themselves. One example of this comes from the CGIL, which launched the "Nuove Identità di Lavoro" (New Identities at Work, or NIDIL) project in 1998 to “give a voice and representation to atypical workers” (NIDIL-CGIL 2007). NIDIL offers services and negotiates collective agreements for groups of workers on parasubordinate contracts in emerging professions. At Atesia, Nidil, the Federazione Informazione Spettacolo e Telecomunicazioni (FISTeL), and Unione Italiana Lavoratori della Telecomunicazione (UILCOM) represented the confederals. FISTeL was born of the merger between the Federazione Informazione e Spettacolo (FIS) and the Sindacato Italiano Lavoratori Telecomunicazioni (SILT).
floor, for new workers the pattern was having one’s contract renewed once a month, then once every three months, then every 12 months. According to their new contracts workers were given swathes of time in which, as freelancers, they could in theory show up, work, and leave when they wanted. These work windows were scheduled six hours a day, six days a week, although management could request an extension of up to four hours a day if there was a heavier volume of calls. If in theory these workers were freelance and thus had every right to work one hour a day or refuse extra hours when they were requested, in practice management duly noted those who refused the extra work. Given the short span of their contracts, the disciplinary tool available to the company come renewal time was formidable.

Atesia workers did not have paid holidays, sick days, or maternity leave, and their pension contributions were paltry. For some women the rhythms were especially trying:

I’ve see many women in Atesia that came in to work during their eighth month of pregnancy, or others who had given birth a very short time previous who would leave the company on breaks to go and breastfeed their babies - some really hair raising things (Federica Ballarò interview).

Payment was made according to “contatto utile”, a threshold Atesia management determined on the basis of the length of the call (for inbound customer assistance) or the answers extracted from the customer in the case of outbound calling where a service was offered. In this electronic version of the piecework production that accompanied Italy’s transformation towards Fordism in the 1950s and 1960s, management had a great deal of control over the labour process while the individual call centre operators had very little. When there were low volumes of incoming calls, a day’s take for workers could be as low as 10 euros. Management, thanks to the technology it
disposed of, could route calls towards certain workers and away from others, and assign workers to projects for better-paying clients, meaning two workers making the same volume of calls could receive different pay. Thus Atesia management had a series of ways in which they could organize the workflow at the call centre and, without stepping afoul of the law, reward some workers or punish others. The floor managers, or Assistenti di Sala, whose main activity, as the CPA suggests, is “that of control,” are the key executors of this power, despite the fact that they themselves are on temp agency contracts (Collettivo PrecariAtesia 2005a).

Although some aspects of workers’ employment at Atesia were governed by contract, management still determined payment unilaterally. On the TIM Business campaign call centre operators were not paid at all for calls clocking in at less than twenty seconds, and were paid more for calls between two minutes and forty seconds to three minutes in length than they were for calls over 3 minutes. This explains why the line tended to drop with some predictability:

Obviously at two minutes and forty-one seconds by chance the call gets cut off… [Management] tried to make it impossible to hang up, but in reality, between ourselves we always figure out some kind of dodge. So it’s currently still possible to do it (Federica Ballarò Interview).

There were also complaints about the general working conditions at Atesia, where in the summer the structure is too hot and in the winter too cold. The floors and ceiling are reportedly sub-standard, meaning that sometimes rain gets inside the building, compromising some of the

56 A significant proportion of Atesia’s business is with TIM, for whom the call centre workers interact with its customers. TIM ranks its customers into “gold”, “silver,” or “copper” categories according to how much they spend. “Gold” customers are taken care of by TIM’s in-house call centre workforce, but workers at Atesia were assigned to the “copper” customers.
workstations. Interviewees also reported that the headset and monitor provided by the company were sub-standard and replaced irregularly.

6.4 The Collettivo PrecariAtesia

The Collettivo PrecariAtesia withdrew representation from CGIL, CISL and UIL through their struggles in substance, not in form” (Domenico Teramo interview)

… a little at a time, we began to recognize each other.
(Cecilia Benedetti interview)

An important factor in the Collettivo Precari’s choice of organizational form were the barriers to collective action produced by the disjuncture between the Fordist framework for union representation in Italy and the use of flexible labour contracts at their call centre. Union representation at Atesia took the form of the RSAs brought in during the 1990s. Yet because the vast majority of workers were on parasubordinate contracts they were barred from voting for their union representatives, who were nominated by the confederals.

A second factor in the development of the Collettivo was the split-up of Atesia in 2004. In May 80.1% of Atesia was sold to COS, a major Italian player in outsourcing services belonging to Almaviva Technologies (Datamonitor 2004).57 The company was owned by Alberto Tripi, who was among the section of the Italian business class that would support the centre-left coalition, elected by the narrowest of margins in 2006. That year the various companies under his control employed 13,000 call centre workers in the country (La Repubblica Online 2006). As a result of the agreement with the confederals in 2000, Telecom would keep the remaining 19.9 %

57 COS employs roughly 15,000 workers, has annual sales of 250 million Euros, a stake in the call centres of the most important Italian companies (Alitalia, Wind, Barilla, Sky, Istat, Indpap), and carries out numerous contracts for the public sector.
stake in Atesia, hiving off this business to its own call centre, Telecontact. From July 1, 2004 the Atesia workers contracted to answer the 187 calls (the Telecom customer service number) were transferred 100 meters away to the Telecontact call centre, where they became part of Telecom’s in-house workforce. In an apparent step up, the new Telecom workers were shifted from co.co.co to subordinate contracts covered by national telecommunications sector agreements. The roughly 3000 employees left at Atesia would work on other contracts for their call centre.

Workers on both sides criticized the draft agreement produced by CGIL-CISL-UIL and Telecom for the Tele Contact centre and Atesia, accusing the unions of having served them up a slightly different variety of labour precarity. Atesia workers were now to be put on co.co.pro contracts, a deal made necessary by the labour market reforms introduced by Legge 30, which had abolished co.co.co contracts. For the roughly 1200 new Telecontact workers the agreement still included the application of several types of precarious contracts (including “apprenticeship” contracts, designed to facilitate the entry into the workforce for new workers) developed under the Legge Biagi. For their part, the confederal unions suggested that the agreement demonstrated the sector was slowly being forced to phase out precarious employment contracts.

The first bone of contention between the parasubordinate workers at Atesia and the confederal unions was that these “apprenticeship” contracts were to be applied to hundreds of workers who had, in their miraculous escape from the endless job churn at Atesia, been working in the digital

58 700 or so of these permanent contracts were the least secure form of subordinate contracts, “tempo determinato” contracts due to expire in 38 months. The remaining 500 workers were put on three types of contracts designed to allow an apprenticeship period for workers and facilitate (Footnote continues on following page)
mills for many years. Far from being apprentices, these were experienced call centre workers. This was not all however: in a familiar move, a necessary prerequisite to accessing this contract for workers was to waive their rights to any benefits and back pay to which they may have been entitled due to their previous misclassification.

The combination of all of this was simply too much for the new Telecom workers to take: they struck for 15 days in front of Tele Contact, beginning the cycle of struggles that would result in the formation of the Collettivo PrecariAtesia. Workers organized a permanent assembly in front of Tele Contact for the duration of the strike. They were supported in this action by a number of Roman labour and social movement groups that had been devoting their attention to Atesia almost since it had emerged. As CPA member Maurizio Testa suggests, these groups “had found in Atesia that symbol of precarity” they were looking for at the cutting edge of the post-Fordist labour market (Maurizio Testa interview). The Assemblea Coordinata e Continuativa Contro la Precarietà (Coordinated and Continuing Assembly Against Precarity, or ACCCP) and the Coordinamento dei Lavoratori di Roma Ovest (Coordinated Workers of Rome-West, or CLARO) brought together a number of activist groups (from neighbourhood collectives to social centres), and had tried to foment labour resistance at Atesia for years.

The rank and file union Cobas also became directly involved in the strike. Many Cobas were Telecom workers themselves, and from the days of the merger between Telecom and STET they had flyer ted outside the company in the hopes of creating a committee inside Atesia and fighting their entry into the workforce, “Contratti di apprendistato contrattuale,” “contratti di apprendistato professionalizzante” and “contratti d’inserimento.”
the precarity characterizing the call factory. For Cobas members at Telecom the relationship between their own labour conditions and those at Atesia could not have been clearer. As Domenico Teramo points out, the outsourcing of an activity by a public sector company is “the other side of the coin of the precarization of stable workers.” For Teramo the Cobas’ goal was to offer “material support” for the strike while respecting the “autonomy and difference” of the groups organizing inside (Domenico Teramo interview). Much to the Cobas’ disappointment however, the Atesia workers who were working only 100 meters away from Tele Contact initially “did not take up that moment of conflict” and “at the time, when we showed up there, they weren’t always receptive to the political signal, the direction we were trying to give them” (Ibid).

At Tele Contact, facing unemployment and uncertainty over when they would receive settlements from claims for retroactive benefits, most of the workers waived their rights and went back to work.

Neither of the affect factories would remain peaceful for long however. On the Telecontact side, having passed from a system of being paid through what amounted to piecework to one where every bit of labour power was squeezed out of their salaried time, workers began to experience first-hand the conditions they had signed on for. The form of command had changed perceptibly in the passage between contractual relationships: the speed-up of work became increasingly difficult for workers and there were many firings, both of which contributed to the slow construction of a Cobas rank and file committee at Tele Contact.

As far as their ex-colleagues working only a hundred meters or so away at Atesia, the aftermath of these struggles would determine their self-organization. As in the Microsoft case, the barriers to organization were daunting - workers’ contractual status, the technology they used, their low
degree of politicization and high degree of political apathy all appeared to work against them relentlessly. Teramo suggests that the targeted hiring carried out by Atesia among young people entering the job market and married women looking to boost the family income by 500 euros or so a month was intended to produce a politically weak composition of workers at the call centre, a disaggregated mass of subjects who “were unused to rebellion” (Ibid). According to Collettivo member Cecilia Benedetti, among younger Atesia workers there was and remains a significant contingent of people who use the income to support the pursuit of their dreams in life (be it music, art, etc) and “who haven’t yet accepted the fact that they can’t make it in the field they really want to get into” (Cecilia Benedetti interview). Valerio Gentile is not as tender in his description of the disjuncture between individual dreams and the systemic realities of call centre employment: “There’s always the hope of trying to find something better, a bit like the heroin addict who says he’ll quit when he feels like it” (Valerio Gentile interview). In addition to this belief on the part of many workers that they were just passing through the call centre industry, and despite the richness of labour organizing history in Italy, for most of the CPA members there was a marked lack of political experience upon entry into Europe’s largest affect factory. Benedetti’s self-description captures what was a common condition for members of the Collettivo: “Aside from the smaller experiences you would have in high school, like the self-management stuff... I was quite ignorant on a political level” (Cecilia Benedetti interview).59

59 This quote points to the uniqueness of the Italian situation. While occupation and self-management of schools and universities has become an institutionalized tactic of the student left since the sixties, it is not nearly participated in with the same collective fervour that characterized the first uprisings in these institutions during the 1970s, or even during a brief surge in the late 1980s/early 1990s during what was called the Pantera, or Panther, movement. The presence of such tactics as a context is not negligible however, and as I suggest below, such forms of struggle can act as a vital reference point when a labour situation ignites.
Regardless of the low degree of resonance political struggles had had in the past for these new workers, with time the reality that their situation was becoming one of permanence among the ranks of call centre labour was difficult to ignore. As Domenico Teramo describes it, because of this, call centre workers “in some way developed a consciousness of their working condition, of their own exploitation, and they felt the need to organize themselves” (Domenico Teramo interview). Indeed by the end of 2004 the situation was getting very tense at Atesia. In December the confederals prolonged the existing labour agreement at the call centre until March of 2005, and in March they prolonged it once more, until September. If the unions’ signing of such contracts was creating unrest among the call centre workers, in April the employer finally provided the spark necessary to set Atesia ablaze by decreasing the rate paid per call. This move was only the most recent of a series of unilateral decreases that had brought their compensation down from 1 euro per call to 90 cents, as management cut pay to the bone in an attempt to boost profits. The atmosphere on the nightshift (when most of the Collettivo workers worked) became incandescent, and flyers appeared calling for action in the “Sala Break”, the space where employees spent their time between shifts. A collective tipping point had been reached. As Mara Portolani suggests “there was simply the need to say enough” (Mara Portolani interview).

The Collettivo may, as Rosanna Nastro laughs, have been “born over 5 cents” (Rosanna Nastro interview), but organizing in a workplace like Atesia presented daunting challenges. The call centre was huge, with thousands of employees, many shifts, and little socializing at work. Indeed even though they had all worked at Atesia for years, many of those who would form the CPA had never met before its first meetings. Alessandro Petricca offers a visual of the isolation at work:

Everyone is there… with headphones on, answering the customer, and therefore there isn’t the kind of relationship between people that there might have been up until twenty, thirty
years ago when work wasn’t as fragmented. We’re talking about post-Fordism (Alessandro Petricca interview).

Cecilia Benedetti found a protest flyer lying around the Sala Break and went to one of the Collettivo’s first meetings. These were initially attended by five or six members, but grew in size very quickly as the “spontaneous aggregation” moved through the workstations at Atesia (Rosanna Nastro interview). The first decision the new group made was to learn more about their contractual situation. Members of the CPA formed a working group and began compiling a dossier so as to both educate themselves and spread knowledge of parasubordinate contracts and how they were being applied at Atesia to their co-workers and the broader community. As collective member Maurizio Testa puts it, “we realized that nobody knew the Legge 30. The employers didn’t know it, or pretended they didn’t, the union didn’t know it or similarly they pretended not to know it, and we didn’t know it. We were signing contracts without really knowing what they actually meant” (Maurizio Testa interview).

One way the Collettivo spread this information was through a self-produced publication by the name of “Sfront End.” The first issue announces the birth of the collective and contains articles such as “Atesia: Call Centre and Precarity Leader” and “Atesian Chronicles”, replete with biting anecdotes of what it is to work in Europe’s largest call centre, to deal with belligerent or thoughtless customers, to never know how long one can expect to work at the company, and so on. Given the risks of exposing themselves, none of the given names of the Collettivo Precari members appear in its pages, which instead lists the “editorial board” by their pen names [“Clikka Qui”, “Ate-“o, “Contatto Inutile”).
Years later, with most of the Collettivo members having lost their jobs in the wake of the strikes that shook Atesia to its foundations, anonymity matters little to them. When asked to recount the birth of the collective as an organizational entity, virtually every member of the collective begins by discussing the principle of self-organization, or as Rosanna Nastro puts it, the act of “doing things for ourselves without delegating to anybody” (Rosanna Nastro interview). As the group oriented itself and reached out towards their colleagues through the spread of information, there developed abiding commitments to self-representation and a refusal to dictate a political line to their co-workers. Rather, as Benedetti suggests in an ironic twist on the popular expression used to describe the trade unions in the Hot Autumn of 1969, the CPA merely began to “ride the wave” of the growing anger amongst Atesia workers (Cecilia Benedetti interview).

As the group began to self-educate, they seized upon the contradictions of their masked contractual status as the latter emerged. As Testa describes, “the moment we realized that our work was actually subordinate and we have a right to specific things, from that moment we behaved like we were subordinate workers in every way” (Maurizio Testa interview). This included holding public meetings, claiming the right to strike, demanding to vote for their union representatives, and bargaining with the employer. As the CPA began to agitate, the confederal unions appeared more often at Atesia, holding meetings and presenting the contracts they were about to sign to workers for approval.

The CPA organized its first strike on the heels of the pay decrease. Calling for a 24-hour work stoppage and a concurrent assembly in the square in front of the Atesia main entrance, the group voiced its demands to Atesia and the confederals in the face of what they called their “Far West” employment situation. They called for subordinate contracts, an immediate raise, benefits
(including vacation, sick pay, severance and maternity leave), and repairs to the Atesia building (Collettivo PrecariAtesia 2005b). The strike was an ingenious neutralization of the flexibility imposed on them and a deft retraining of it against the employer. Parasubordinate workers cannot legally go on strike, yet if the overwhelming majority of Atesia workers were technically freelance then they could come to work whenever they liked in the six-hour shift allotted to them. As such, the Collettivo merely ensured a coordinated claiming of this right to not work, a move that crippled the call centre for 24 hours. The strike was followed by two more in June that enjoyed strong support and turned heads throughout the industry. Indeed the actions were arguably more effective than many of those organized according to the process imposed on subordinate workers with a contract and clear union representation, given that in Italy the latter must (as in most post-Fordist national economies) ensure that the union sanctions the strike, respect windows in which the strike is permitted, and even apply for permission to the company. Post-Fordist restructuring, neoliberal legislation governing labour relations, and the subjection of language to the creation of surplus value appeared to have created its antagonist - a collective of information-savvy workers who were taking on both their union and their boss.

Stung by the unexpected explosion of struggle within its walls, Atesia management initially responded by suggesting that CGIL, CISL and UIL were the only interlocutors they would deal with. For the strike organizers and everyone else working the digital assembly lines there was a publicly posted warning from management however, couched as a hope that workers would ignore “those who, by every means, even illicit, work to divide, confuse, disorient and influence, without any positive results, spaces of attention and legitimation which are not rightfully deserved or owed to them” (cited in Collettivo PrecariAtesia 2005b). The full scope of the Collettivo’s struggle became clear the following day however, when there appeared another warning, this time
from the CGIL. The notice lashed out at strike organizers, describing them as “forces bent upon inserting themselves within the social malaise, which at Atesia is strong, in order to affirm a voluntary and authoritarian notion of the management of trade union conflict, one which has inevitably produced the defeat rather than the victory of workers” (cited in Ibid).

From the first strike onwards there was a rapid intensification of struggles as the collective’s organizing spread beyond Atesia’s walls. The Collettivo began to connect with workers at other call centres, occupied social centres, and local activist collectives, and the language in their literature began to adopt autonomist hues. One flyer referred to the “process of recomposition occurring between various categories of workers,” and suggests that their struggle is worrying to both owners and “their” unions (Collettivo PrecariAtesia et al 2005). The confederals had called for a one-day strike on June 24th, a move that was widely perceived as a bid to regain the strategic initiative. By mid-July the Collettivo was organizing regular demonstrations in front of Atesia, and held an assembly in front of the local municipal offices at Cinecittà. Beyond these forms of direct action, the CPA employed all of the legal tools at their disposal as well. Labour Assessors from the Region, Province and Comune were handed a dossier documenting the illegality of the contract situation at Atesia in June (Collettivo PrecariAtesia 2005c).

With contracts for hundreds of workers set to expire at the end of September the temperature continued to rise at Atesia. In July the confederals posted a public notice claiming workers were hearing rumours of mercenaries (“prezzolati”) among the CPA that were paid by management to derail the collective bargaining process. “In a democracy the union has the obligation to represent the will of the majority of workers,” it suggested, “and not only that of a small, albeit noisy, minority” (NIDIL et al 2005). The path towards “stabilization for everybody,” the
bargaining delegation declared, was to secure 1) a well-defined schedule for transition; 2) criteria for the stabilization of individual workers (i.e. by length of service), and 3) transitional contracts with guaranteed remuneration and benefits (Ibid).

The very same morning this notice was posted, however, roughly 800 people working on outbound calls found out that rather than having their contracts renewed as usual they would be laid off, and were told to call a hotline in September to find out if they would get a chance to work with the company again. The situation at Atesia degenerated through the course of the day, becoming tense and difficult to control. Alessandro Petricca was among those who found out they were losing their livelihood: “There were some real problems for the company’s ability to manage the situation, which escalated. Inside the Atesia hall where calls are answered, people were getting up from their workstations, shouting, berating the managers...” (Alessandro Petricca interview). Many of the Collettivo’s members were among the list of the redundant. As harried managers oversaw the situation flanked by police officers, the collective called a meeting to discuss a response. The CPA picketed the entrance, but that evening management fired four of its members for obstructing the work of their colleagues and taking part in unauthorized assemblies (Collettivo PrecariAtesia et al 2005). The situation at Atesia had come to a head.

On September 15th the Collettivo struck Atesia again in response the confederals’ announcement of an agreement that featured more “contratti d’inserimento” and co.co.co contracts (Collettivo PrecariAtesia 2005d). By this point the concept of precarity and the discourse surrounding it had gained widespread currency on the Italian left, spreading beyond rank and file unions and social centres to become, as general elections approached, a key plank of the poll-leading centre-left coalition’s platform. The CPA was, not surprisingly, suspicious of
Prodi’s coalition, suggesting in the first months of his government’s tenure that social movements ought to see public institutions “not as a simple interlocutor or potential ally, but as a party with which to bargain – as one does with the boss – upon the basis of the real relations of force” (Collettivo PrecariAtesia 2005e). As 2005 turned into 2006, Atesia workers began to intensify their use of forms of direct action, occupying the offices of various town councils, the Ministry of Labour, and the CGIL.

In April of 2006 the confederal unions and Atesia reached yet another agreement, including 170 subordinate contracts (for those who had been at Atesia for at least 7 years) paid 650 Euros a month gross for 25 hours a week, and for other workers an array of parasubordinate contracts. 900 layoffs were announced as a part of the deal. The CPA’s response to the agreement was predictably bitter: “For 650 Euros a month a ‘lucky’ minority will always be at the company’s disposal, and for the rest there is piecework, no rights, and layoffs.” The group continued to demand permanent employment for all and at least 1000 Euros a month with holidays, sick pay and maternity (Collettivo PrecariAtesia 2006a). The contract took effect in May and ended up resulting in 400 layoffs, among which were most of the remaining members of the Collettivo.

If things seemed dire as the summer of 2006 wore on, the struggles generated by the call centre workers were by this point producing effects that seemed out of all proportion with their modest beginnings. Crucially, the situation was now becoming a problem for Romano Prodi’s razor-thin majority. If Prodi had promised to address labour precarity, the lower reaches of the state’s machinery were now threatening to act on their own to achieve this. In a repeat of the 1997 SULTA incident, the Work Inspectorate of Rome was preparing a report on its inspection (requested months previous by the CPA) of Atesia, in which it would rule on the legality of the
company’s application of parasubordinate contracts. Cornered by the ongoing labour strife at Atesia and widely rumoured to be concerned over the outcome of the Inspectorate’s decision, the Minister for Labour, Cesare Damiano, was preparing a circular (“circolare”) for local labour inspectors that would determine the exact parameters of how parasubordinate contracts could be applied in call centres.\(^60\)

Even if he did manage to beat the Roman Inspectorate to the punch by releasing the circular, Minister Damiano had to tread very delicately with this decision however. On the one hand the centre-left was, nominally, the friend of labour and the repository of the multi-million member confederal unions’ hopes for a sympathetic ear in government. On the other, COS owner Alberto Tripi, who was very close to Margherita party leader and Vice-Premier Francesco Rutelli, was a prominent member of the centre-left coalition’s base of support among the country’s business class. In addition, this was the Ministry’s first intervention into the deeply precarious call centre industry, so the circular would inevitably be seized upon as representative of the centre-left coalition’s strategy on the controversial Legge Biagi. Lastly, in a situation that only neoliberalism could have created, the state itself was a major customer for the Italian call centre industry in general and COS in particular, and thus arguably had more than a simple passing interest in making sure capital’s command over labour in the sector was assured.

Having been mostly ejected from their workplace, in anticipation of such decisions the Collettivo began to focus its attention on public institutions. In June they demonstrated in front of

\(^{60}\) This is a “circolare applicativo” or a circular outlining how a particular law must be applied (in this case the Legge 30).
the Ministry of Labour as Damiano, trade union delegations, and call centre executives met to discuss the fate of the industry. Shortly thereafter the Ministry of Labour released its much-vaunted “circolare,” which, if it did not name any call centre in particular, was without a doubt made to measure for Atesia. The Circolare Damiano was indeed an admirable bit of tightrope walking on the Minister’s part. It gave something to labour, decreeing that inbound call centre workers were to be regularized as subordinate workers since they had less control over their labour conditions than those working outbound campaigns. As far as outbound call centre workers were concerned, because they could in theory control their work to a greater extent, the gift to the call centre industry was that it could continue to hire workers on co.co.pro contracts.

In August the Work Inspectorate presented its report. If the Circolare Damiano had saved something for industry, the Ispettorato’s report appeared to be a victory for Atesia workers. As a result of its inspection, it decreed that Atesia hire on all of its 3,200 workers on subordinate contracts, as well as compensate the roughly 8,000-10,000 thousand workers that had passed through the company since 2001 (Sciutto 2006a) due to their false classification as co.co.pros.

By this point there were episodes of unrest at call centres across Italy. In June, Snater (a national rank and file union for telecommunications, radio and television workers) had called for strikes at the inbound Telecom call centres to protest the “nightmarish” work rhythms and intensified surveillance of workers by management. In September a national demonstration of call centre workers, organized primarily by the Collettivo Precari, was held in Rome. In December there was an unofficial work to rule campaign on the part of workers at a COS call centre in Palermo, where workers demanded collective bargaining rights, production quota prizes, passage from part to full-time contracts, and more flexible shifts for women with children. In a
strategy that was reportedly costing the company 10,000 Euros a day, call centre operators were staying on the phone as long as possible by being as helpful as they could with customers and creating digital line-ups that overloaded digital switchboards. Call centre agitation was reported in the southern cities of Catania and Naples (Sciotto, 2006b). The CPA continued to pressure union and state representatives. During the an event in which Labour Minister Damiano and the National Secretary of the CGIL Guglielmo Epifani were speaking, as Maurizio Testa describes, “We said, let’s intervene. And when we say we’re intervening, we mean we go there with thirty or forty people, block everything, and we give them our take on things, because if you don’t have a voice that’s what you have to do” (Maurizio Testa interview). The action resulted in scattered shoving matches between the CGIL’s stewards, the CPA, and its allies.

By the Fall of 2006, COS, feeling what had been the virtually unmitigated power of its command over call centre labour slipping, responded by suggesting that it would hire 4000 at its various call centres permanently if the results of the inspection were annulled and the criteria regarding inbound and outbound workers determined in the Circolare Damiano adopted. On October 3rd a sectoral agreement (“accordo interconfederale”) was signed between the confederal unions and companies in the call centre industry that called for the application of the Circolare Damiano to the entire sector (Sciotto 2006c). Given the turmoil in the industry however, it became clear that such an agreement would not be sufficient, and that the state would have to step in more decisively than it already had. By late autumn, with the participation of the confederal unions, an agreement was being hammered out between the Ministry of Labour and the call centre sector regarding the back pay employers would be forced to offer to thousands of workers as a result of the Inspectorate’s ruling.
The plan, proposed and approved as a part of the government’s 2007 budget (*Legge Finanziaria*), involved an unprecedented gift from the state to COS. Minister Damiano’s legislation, like his position adopted in the circular, was once again creatively disingenuous in its approach to the sector’s labour issues. It decreed the permanent hiring of parasubordinate inbound workers, but at the same time offered an irresistible enticement for Tripi and COS: Article 178 of the financial bill set aside roughly 300 million euros of public money (to be paid over two years) to offset the potential loss suffered by the company due to the application of the Inspectorate’s decisions. Damiano’s solution also included a familiar tactic. The financial law, with the approval of the confederal unions, forgave COS’ retroactive obligations towards individual workers if it hired them on permanently, via a waiver to be signed by each worker in exchange for a subordinate position. The much-fêted intervention by the Minister required that the unions and the COS’ parent corporation Gruppo Almaviva reach a suitable agreement for the call centres under Tripi’s control. When they did, on December 12, Damiano called it “a success for unions and enterprise” (cited in La Repubblica Online 2006). The confederal unions were equally positive in their announcements, focussing on the transition from parasubordinate contracts to subordinate ones and suggesting that this was only the beginning of the stabilization of labour relationships in the sector. The agreement stabilized 4000 inbound workers and 2500 workers who did both inbound and outbound calling through a subordinate contract that was a part of the national contract for telecommunications workers.

If this much was good news, there were less-publicized parts of the accord that were deeply unfavourable to call centre workers. For roughly 1000 outbound workers there would still be apprenticeship contracts. In addition, while inbound and mixed inbound/outbound workers would have stability at last, the company was not offering them a full-time subordinate job. As
discussed above, there are contracts (contratti a termine, part-time, or others) within the bounds of subordinate work that do not offer job security, and these were the ones settled on. The contracts offered by Atesia were part-time (twenty hours a week), demanded 24 hours a day potential availability in scheduling, and paid 550 Euros (gross) a month. Predictably, many Atesia workers contested the accord. In a city like Rome, where students can pay 750 Euros a month for a shared room in the university district, the salary was completely inadequate towards achieving a living wage for call centre workers, who would also have to give up their right to past compensation in the process. December 22-23 the CGIL held a referendum on the contract among Atesia workers, who voted to turn it down by a 60-40 margin (Collettivo PrecariAtesia 2006b). The confederal unions went ahead and signed the accord.

6.5 Composition, Organization, and Memory in the Precarity Factory

Despite all the backslapping and public celebrations of the labour peace to come at Atesia and throughout the Italian call centre industry, 2007 was ushered in at Tripi’s company with unannounced and unilateral changes to the workers’ schedules. When four female employees suggested they could not meet the new demands made of them due to the fact that they had small children, they were let go on the spot. Things were certainly changing at Atesia, but in some ways they also remained the same.

Interviewing members of the Collettivo PrecariAtesia and reading the literature produced as a result of the struggles at the company, one has the feeling that the dust has settled after two years of some of the most intense conflict to emerge from a call centre anywhere in the world. Only two of the Collettivo’s members still work at Atesia and thus face the decision as to whether they
should forfeit compensation for years of underpayment in order to access an allegedly secure position as a part of the new labour agreement. Both suggested that they would not, because the security of the new positions was dubious, the salary impossibly low, and to sign a waiver stating that they had never been subordinate workers would be to turn their backs on a position the CPA had held all along. Over the next few months, thousands of workers at Europe’s largest call centre were to be faced with this decision. The collective, or what remains of it within Atesia, is as usual not recommending any course of action for workers, stating in flyers and elsewhere that this is a decision each worker must make on their own.

When asked what direction the CPA’s would take next, there were only partly humorous responses to the effect of “we haven’t quite figured that out yet.” After all, some form of stability has been achieved for workers at Atesia, weak as it may be. Symbolically, the move has taken much wind out of the collective’s sails. How can there be a collective of precarious workers at Atesia if none of them are precarious? Indeed how can there be a collective of Atesia workers if none of them work at the company? Surveying this scenario, it is impossible not to recognize that the struggles at Atesia have resulted in fired workers, a slightly more regulated form of precarity, and still-intact control over the labour process on the part of COS’ workforce engineers.

Yet, as many of the members of the CPA will tell you, the result of their organizing ought to be judged on more than the current relations of force at the company. If the Italian state was forced to intervene into the situation of call centres in Italy it is overwhelmingly due to the repeated explosions of unrest at Atesia over the course of at least two years, where the flexibility imposed on workers, like at Microsoft, was beaten back. Albeit in a bittersweet way, the struggles of the Collettivo PrecariAtesia were successful beyond anyone’s expectations. Rosanna Nastro reminds
us that “[a]t the beginning, when we demanded job security, they called us crazy” (Rosanna Nastro interview). With more than a little pride, Christian Bosi suggests, “if today in Italy the legislation surrounding work has changed, it hasn’t changed because of the CGIL, or CISL, or UIL, or Rifondazione Comunista. It’s changed because of us” (Christian Bosi interview). If a useful way to judge the efficacy of struggle is to see how power is forced to react, then one must be impressed at what the Collettivo has been able to achieve, given the abject position workers were in to begin with. Bosi points to the dent put into the public purse as a result of their organizing: “the government passed the budget on purpose. They did it ad personam, for us. When all is said and done, they set aside 300 million euros for a single company” (Ibid). The Collettivo’s organizing undoubtedly forced both the labour unions and the centre-left government to act, albeit in a contradictory fashion, upon the grotesque conditions reigning within the Italian call centre industry. And while both coalition parties and the confederal unions claimed the laurels in the media for the pacification of what was becoming an embarrassment for the government, they were nonetheless forced to come out into the open on the social condition of precarity, which, as Rosanna Nastro suggests, by this point has become “…a part of the parameters of normality” (Rosanna Nastro interview). In addition, spreading awareness of the dismal labour conditions at Atesia, and achieving broad-based recognition that labour security was not only desirable, but also necessary for call centre operators, was a success.

After all, as illustrated above, by the beginning of this century owners in the Italian call centre industry had virtually unmitigated command over the immaterial labour in their affect factories. Legally, we have seen that the various typologies of contracts allowed them dependably high rates of return on each worker, not to mention little union interference in the process of its extraction. Technologically, instruments that can route call flows to one worker rather than
another, and the very structured isolation imposed on workers via headsets and cubicles (which blocks horizontal forms of communication between workers), meant that Atesia quite literally organized the labour process as it saw fit. Subjectively, the army of call centre operators was fished from the sea of Roman disaffected youth and housewives deemed ready for a second tour of affective work duty. Atesia was, to use a well-worn comparison, an advanced model of panoptic space. The challenges to enacting stable and threatening forms of recomposition among workers at the company were formidable.

Yet, as Marx suggests in his discussion of the process of primitive accumulation, just when the domination of capital seems complete, there somehow emerges an antagonist. Pushing this analogy further, in the case of the Collettivo PrecariAtesia, much like the industrial proletariat discussed by Marx in Volume I of *Capital*, the group of call centre workers was “trained, united and organized by the very capitalist process of production” (1990, 927). Is the subjection of language, affect, and communication to the ends of surplus value extraction creating its own version of the unruly subject that played havoc in the steam and coal-driven factories of the industrial revolution? While the case of the CPA alone cannot answer this question, there is some irony in the fact that workers who were intentionally misclassified for years as “freelance”, that is, ones who are theoretically autonomous, creative, and self-organizing, ended up adopting a form of organization in which they were autonomous (from unions and political parties), creative (in the forms of struggle they generated) and self-organized.

Without suggesting that this form of organization is somehow a “natural” one for the struggles of immaterial labourers, I would like to remain within the realms of the case at hand, asking a more simple question: Why did the CPA opt for self-organization? When answering this, it is
important to remember that their organizational form was, among other things, an effect of their juridical exclusion from collective bargaining rights. When this fact came into combination with the systemic and deeply entrenched nature of Italian corporate power, the exclusive relationship between the CGIL, CISL, and UIL and Atesia management, and the confederals’ active opposition to this new political subject at the company, self-organization became one of the few practicable paths available to the members of the Collettivo. As Testa suggests when asked whether the struggle against the confederal unions was worth it: “I would have quite happily done without it. But it was unavoidable” (Maurizio Testa interview).

Once a decision to self-organize was made however, the Collettivo demonstrated an uncanny ability to produce subversion, as they began to “capitalize on Atesia’s contradictions and organize forms of struggle” (Domenico Teramo interview). Paradoxically, as Rosanna Nastro suggests, at the beginning the Collective’s strong point was their inexperience, a mnemonic void that was quickly filled with ideas for action (Rosanna Nastro interview). Atesia workers in general and the Collettivo in particular were astoundingly creative in the invention of digital sabotage and flexible strikes that harnessed the limits imposed by their post-Fordist contractual relationship.

Nonetheless, as I hope to have made quite clear in my discussion of the Italian historical context, the Collettivo PrecariAtesia, once formed, also had a reservoir of collective memory of organizational forms that they could draw upon. Italy has an extraordinarily rich tradition of self-organization and the refusal of political mediation in the form of political parties and trade unions, one that permeates activism, always resurfacing, perpetually being reinvented. In this way there is what I will call a deep and rich memory of organization that the CPA entered into a mutually constitutive relationship with during the course of its struggles at Atesia. There were
rank and file unions like Cobas to prove that the confederal trade unions were not the only way to organize struggle. There were the occupied and self-organized social centres to show them the value of direct action tactics. And there were local coalitions of activists (CLARO and the ACCCP) demonstrating solidarity and mutual aid. All of these organizations and organizational forms emerged as a result of the Red Decade, and constitute a collective memory that is constantly oriented towards radical change.

This memory of organization, when tapped into by the Collettivo and applied to their particular setting, was extremely effective in confronting their labour precarity and forcing labour struggle in Italian call centres onto a new and different plateau. The contracts entering into effect at Atesia are part time, or what Domenico Teramo of the Cobas refers to as the “new frontier of precarious work” (Domenico Teramo interview). And for the moment there is relative labour peace at Atesia, for the first time in years. Whatever struggles there are to come at the company, they will draw upon a memory of organization that is now more complex and enriched, a memory of which the Collettivo PrecariAtesia in this case study are a part. And whatever forms the struggles to come will generate, they will also, inevitably, produce the organization of memory, and lay the basis for the struggles to come after them.
Chapter 7
Subsumption, Immaterial Labour, and Collective Organization

This dissertation has examined three cases of the subterranean stream of labour resistance and organization by knowledge workers within post-Fordism. The first inquiry examined the formation of WashTech, a union for high-tech workers formed by “permatemps” at Microsoft, the world’s dominant producer of computer software. The second case looked at a group of clerical/call centre workers who were swept into the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP) union and struck the Atlantic Canadian convergent telecommunications company, Aliant. The last inquiry explored the struggles of the Collettivo PrecariAtesia at Europe’s largest call centre. This chapter closes the dissertation by considering the indications offered by its three inquiries into what we can call the organizations of immaterial labour. Two questions in particular are confronted in what follows: a) What are the key tendencies characterizing these case studies, and b) how can these tendencies be used strategically for those aiming to further collective organizing by knowledge workers?

The three moments of labour struggle examined in this dissertation are, without a doubt, diverse in their contexts and in the forms of collective organization they present. As far as models of collective organization, they range from the CEP’s convergent and Fordist-style, company-by-company trade unionism, to the rank and file, social movement unionism of the Collettivo PrecariAtesia, to WashTech’s “open-source” union organizing which functions across the high-tech sector at arm’s length from another convergent union, the Communication Workers of America. The cases also differ significantly in terms of their labour processes and the type of
employment relationships they are characterized by. The experiences of the workday ranged from the largely unsupervised and creative “tinkering” of the Microsoft permatemps to the heavily monitored, routinized, and software-dictated performativity of the Aliant and Atesia call centres, and presented numerous examples falling somewhere between these two poles. As far as the employment relationship is concerned, the cases offered further differences - between the Fordist-style, full-time employment and a 40-hour workweek of the CEP 506 union member, the “grey zone” parasubordinate contracts and electronic piecework of the Atesia precari, and the temp agency employment endured by those Douglas Coupland called Microserfs. Given such a mishmash of forms of employment, labour processes, and types of resistance, not only might developing lessons from them seem quixotic, but the simple act of making basic assertions regarding these cases and the workers animating them appears as a difficult proposition.

Despite their differences, there is much to be gained by an analysis that cuts across these three inquiries however. One way to begin, when confronting the question of the tendencies characterizing them, is by reconsidering the relationship between them and the broader macro-level transformations they are a part of. That is, given that the dissertation has spent a great deal of time thus far on the particularities these cases offer, to begin their collective analysis from a renewed consideration of what they have in common: the relationship between their occurrence within an emergent form of capitalism, post-Fordism, and the type of work they arise from, immaterial labour. A more textured understanding of this relationship, I believe, can be developed by considering it alongside a distinction Marx makes between different phases of capitalist development, ones he refers to as characterized by the “formal” and “real” subsumption of labour by capital (1990, 1019-1038). Where Marx used this concept to refer to the colonization of other types of labour (first individual farming, and subsequently artisanal
manufacturing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), I situate the dissertation’s inquiries within what the study of these cases demonstrates to be a passage between the formal and real subsumption of immaterial labour. This process, as these case studies demonstrate, is marked by the arrival of a different labour process and type of worker, or in other words a new composition of labour. In this way, much as was done at the beginning of each of the inquiries separately, we establish an understanding of the mutating historical context for these cases before drawing our lessons from them.

Bound up as they are in the ongoing subsumption of immaterial labour and its related upheavals, the case studies in this dissertation highlight the formidable barriers to the emergence of the subterranean stream of collective organization by knowledge workers under post-Fordism. These challenges include a) the growing disjuncture between models of industrial relations premised on the Fordist compromise and the post-Fordist relations of production and b) the mobility of capital, or the use of labour outsourcing as a disciplinary mechanism. Given the instability of the socio-economic terrain, and these new and very serious barriers to the composition of immaterial labour, this research suggests that the cases of collective organization enacted by these digital workers are experimental and tentative. Within this experimentation, one feature has emerged as key to each of the case studies, something I have called the memory of struggle. The memory of struggle, broadly, is the existence of historical models of struggle and organization to apply to a particular situation of exploitation in the attempt to counteract it. Within the storm unleashed by capital’s colonization of communication and its transformation of the labour process, the production of a memory of struggle has emerged as a central feature in each of the three cases.
The goal of this dissertation is not, as the liberal-democratic perspective we explored in Chapter 1 devoted its efforts towards, to map out capital’s victory over these new forms of labour however. Nor is it to propose a transcendent solution to the problems facing political organization by knowledge workers. Rather, in the words of Mario Tronti, the more modest goal of these inquiries is that of recognizing “the power of that which is born” (2006, 11), of looking, in other words, within these cases for the already-existing seeds of a contemporary strategy, or set of strategies, for information workers. I close the chapter, therefore, by cautiously venturing into the realm of the prescriptive, considering the ways in which, for emerging collective organizing by cognitive workers, we can use the indications offered by these and other cases. In its most promising and threatening articulations, the organization of immaterial labour is occurring at the intersection of spontaneous struggles by digital workers and a process of union renewal currently underway within the established labour movement. It involves an open process of adaptation to post-Fordism, in which both new forms of organization, new subjectivities, and new social demands are being produced. The second indication drawn from these cases is their highlighting of the vital importance of precarity as an axis cutting across these cases and one that, both there and in other quarters of the labour movement is generating new and powerful demands. These two processes, I suggest, are ones we might refer to as productive of a post-Fordist organization of memory.

7.1 The Subsumption of Immaterial Labour

As capital grew from the fifteenth century, colonizing human activity in the perpetual pursuit of new kinds of labour to fuel its production of profit, the mode of production often swallowed the existing labour process whole in different settings. Legalized by sweeping legislative changes such as the abolition of the feudal tenure of the commons and bolstered by terror and violence,
early capitalists claimed the common fields as their own and subjected farming to the production of profit, but initially did not change the techniques by which the peasants farmed. Not long thereafter this process was repeated, as capitalist relations of production overtook forms of artisanal manufacturing that had for centuries been organized into guilds and workshops.

This transition, for Marx, is marked by the arrival of a different type of worker:

When a peasant who has always produced enough for his needs becomes a day labourer working for a farmer; when the hierarchic order of guild production vanishes making way for the straight-forward distinction between the capitalist and the wage-labourers he employs; when the former slave-owner engages his former slaves as paid workers, etc., then we find what is happening is that production processes of various social provenances have been transformed into capitalist production (1990, 1020, emphasis added).

Marx referred to this process as the “formal subsumption” of labour by capital, a phase marked by the fact that despite the fundamentally different relationship that is created, capital leaves the worker’s labour process “as it finds it” (Ibid, 1021), content merely to subject it to the generation of surplus value. This process, as with most historical ones, is uneven, meaning that during formal subsumption one finds pre-capitalist forms of exchange existing alongside capitalist ones - indeed it may even be difficult to tell them apart. This condition is not satisfactory to the owners for long however. The next step, for Marx, is the move towards what he calls a “specifically capitalist” mode of production, in which capital “not only transforms the situations of the various agents of production but actually revolutionizes their actual mode of labour and the real nature of the labour process as a whole” (Ibid). This process produces the transformation of the artisan’s workshop into the factory, a transition that signals the real subsumption of labour under capital.
While some understand real subsumption to be the state in which all of human activity has been submitted to the production of surplus value (the social factory), or a kind of highest stage of capital, it is arguably more helpful to consider the general process of subsumption, of subjecting new social and geographical spaces to the capitalist extraction of profit, as an ongoing process. With each phase of capitalism new spaces, traditions and activities become subjected to the extraction of surplus value - old practices are incorporated or destroyed, and new ones are created. Therefore, during the formal subsumption of labour in the 16th and 17th centuries, accumulation was unleashed on the English countryside through the enclosure of the commons, allowing for the beginnings of agricultural capitalism. In the 17th and 18th centuries there was another phase of formal subsumption, this time within manufacturing. The real subsumption of manufacturing resulted in the factory system and the industrial revolution, and its highest expression, across capitalist developed G8 countries, was Fordism. Since roughly the 1970s, post-Fordist capital has opened a new and singular phase of accumulation. This phase has certainly seen a spatial expansion, which, employing rapid advances in information technology, has resulted in the creation of a fully global market. Yet the particularity of post-Fordist capital has been its intensive development (Hardt and Negri 2000, 255-56), in which a different type of human activity is targeted, or subsumed. Post-Fordist capital, in its relatively brief history, has increasingly subjected the very stuff of social life - language, communication, and affect - to the production of surplus value.

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61 This has resulted, on the one hand in a school of Marxists discussing the “limits” to capital, and another, led by autonomist perspectives like those of Hardt and Negri, suggesting that there is no longer an “outside” to capital. If the first perspective is not overly convincing when measured up against capital’s ability to develop intensively, the second can overstate its conclusions.
Along with Carlo Vercellone (2007) I believe there is a great deal to be gleaned from considering the similarities between the subsumption occurring at the dawn of capitalism in Europe and that of our current historical period. As with capital’s first spread, it is uneven. Indeed the subjection of language, communication, and affect to the extraction of surplus value did not begin with post-Fordism, but has advanced in spurts throughout the course of the twentieth century. As Dan Schiller (1996) has shown, attention to this process has marked the discipline of communication studies over the course of its development. The members of the Frankfurt School saw the early signs of this most clearly, reflecting on the formal subsumption of the process of cultural and artistic production to capitalist surplus value and, subsequently, its real subsumption as the cultural industries were transformed, the star system adopted, popular musical production standardized, and industries consolidated (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). Similarly, Braverman described the formal and then real subsumption of the communicative and organizational talents of clerks and secretaries within what he called monopoly capitalism. As much as this process can be found prior to the onset of flexible accumulation however, the subsumption of immaterial labour intensified most drastically in the 1970s with the advent of post-Fordism.

As Marx suggested, new societies are born of force rather than consensus (1990, 917). To enable the expropriation of what we might refer to as the communicative commons, just as the physical commons had been legally expropriated centuries ago, a series of domestic and international measures were adopted to facilitate the exploitation of this potentially endless market. Indeed the broad requirements of post-Fordism are also the necessary pre-conditions of each of the case studies we have explored: the de-industrialization of production, the privatization of public telecommunications resources, the convergence of technological platforms (particularly
in the area of information technology), and the overhauling of labour laws so as to allow a much
greater flexibility within the labour process. What do such moves provide, for capital? On the
one hand, as Dan Schiller (2000) and others have shown, they provide vast new markets. Thus
during the 1970s Bill Gates was able to move into an area of human activity (software
production) that pre-existed the market for it, hiring on a first nucleus of tinkerers and calling the
fledgling organization Microsoft. In similar fashion, with the great privatizations of the 1990s,
capital frequently swallowed public telecommunications monopolies whole. Yet post-Fordism
also produces something else that is of vital importance. One, exceptionally strong connector
unites all of the people I interviewed: Whether we are speaking of the American northwest, the
Maritime province of New Brunswick or the periphery of Rome, none of the workers interviewed
ever grew up with the likelihood of working in manufacturing. They entered the emergent
telecommunications, software, and contact centre industries, the first in their families to have
worked in their particular profession.62 For this is the other key effect of the measures associated
with post-Fordist restructuring – they produce a different type of worker.

As with its initial subsumption of agricultural labour and manufacturing, capital does not rest
when it has submitted new areas to the production of surplus value and created a new kind of
worker. At that point competition, one of the “immanent laws” of capitalist production Marx
says, becomes visible, and the “centralization of capitals” occurs (Ibid, 929). In whatever the
new area happens to be, be it slaves or silicon chips, competition between individual capitalists

62 If this is clear in the case of call centres and software, some might object that people have been
working in the telecommunications sector for some time, not to mention the fact that these
workers have a vigorous history of labour organizing. The latter is certainly true, but the
privatization of public monopolies and the development of regulated competition in this sector
(Footnote continues on following page)
leads to intervention by owners in their labour processes. The importance of Ford’s Highland Park plant, the first to use an assembly line in the construction of cars, was, therefore, that it signalled a radical advance within the real subsumption of manufacturing, inaugurating a period in which capital’s command was imposed more directly than ever before in the production of automobiles. With the onset of post-Fordism, new industries have been created and new battles inaugurated between capitalists vying to control as much as they can of this new phase. The production of intangible goods, or the commodification of knowledge, affect and communication, is, albeit unevenly, steadily becoming subject to a regime of real subsumption.

Against generalizations that are incautious, it should be stated once more that we appear to be only at the beginning of post-Fordism, and thus only now are starting to trace its contours and lines of force. The transition from existing as a simple human activity, through to formal and then real subsumption, is a long and uneven process. Some forms of labour, as with the cultural industry workers, journalists, clerks, accountants, etc, have already completed this passage. Others have yet to begin their descent. The whole New Economy boom of the 1990s, for example, was premised on the formal subsumption of entire areas of human activity that had previously existed outside of the market as little more than amateur tinkering with technology, or perhaps a cultural passion. It makes sense, then, to hear Andrew Ross speak of New Economy managers who knew less of the labour process than their “no collar” employees working at the first web firms. It is equally the case that still other areas - vast continents of language, communication, and affect - are only now beginning their long migration towards becoming sources of fuel for the production of surplus value. Here we can think of the development of

creates, as we have seen, a markedly different labour process, and, thanks to technological (Footnote continues on following page)
what is being referred to as “Web 2.0,” which presents vast vistas for the commodification of human activity as capitalism subsumes pre-existing forms of communication and social relations through companies like Facebook and Google. The processes associated with the subsumption of immaterial labour quite literally turn the world upside-down. Not only does it create new markets, it produces global, and virtual (Aneesh 2006), flows of immaterial labour. As Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2004, 9) document, these shifts are evident within the more affective subsets of immaterial labour (“something that can look a lot like love,” as they say) as well, as the marketization of caring labour is leading to large-scale migrations of women from less developed regions in order to provide nannies, nurses and sex workers to the more developed ones.

The first way to cut into the three case studies in this dissertation, therefore, is to understand them as occurring within the general passage towards the real subsumption of immaterial labour. Consider each of the cases. The unending upheaval the Aliant clerical workers were subject to in the transition from a “help desk” to a call centre functions as Aliant management merged and radically altered the production processes of four ex-public telecommunications providers: “At the start we came in, we did our work, and we went home, and now it’s much more structured by management. They supervise much closer, much more closely now than it was. And the work environment changes so quickly also,” says CEP member Philippe Roy (Philippe Roy interview). In similar fashion, think of the mutation of the labour process of Atesia employees from its beginnings as a public company in the late 1980s with a hundred or so employees and a vaguely-defined “market research” role to its current status as a veritable affect factory of over four thousand employees, functioning 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Finally, in a different way but convergence and re-regulation, has also produced qualitatively different markets.
one demonstrating a virtually identical transformation of the labour process, think of Microsoft’s flexible re-engineering and reordering of its company, one that has allowed it to increasingly outsource portions of its production process. We have come a long way from Bill Gates and his small gang of nerds throwing together an operating system in a basement. This dissertation, then, is tantamount to offering case studies of labour organizing and resistance against the enclosure of the commons, or of the reaction of skilled American labourers at Taylorization and the arrival of their nemesis, the assembly line. The case studies, each in their own way, offer acts of resistance by immaterial labour to the process of real subsumption under capital.

Paolo Virno gives a sense of the effects such a transformation produces:

Every drastic metamorphosis of productive organization is destined from the start, to conjure up the pangs of "primitive accumulation," necessitating, all over again, the transformation of a relationship among things (new technologies, a different allocation of investments, etc.) into a social relationship. It is exactly in this delicate interval that, at times, there appears the subjective aspect of that which, later on, becomes an irrefutable course of fact. (Paolo Virno 2004, 105)

The historical period described in this dissertation is precisely one of these “delicate intervals,” one of those moments of historical transition where new relations of production are becoming social relationships. Despite what liberal-democratic thinkers declare or imply, some of these are also becoming antagonistic in the process. The three inquiries are certainly bewildering in the jumble of differences they present, but they are also valuable in that they offer some of the first glimpses of a “subjective” aspect we are interested in: the emergence of the struggles and organization of post-Fordist immaterial labour.
7.2 Immaterial Labour and Memory of Struggle

The real subsumption of labour, for Marx, includes “large-scale production,” the “direct application of science and technology” to the labour process, and the completion of a third process, the development of what he terms the “social forces of production of labour” (1990, 1035). The latter expression names the production of a suitable and abundant labour force that can be plugged into the now-transformed production process. With respect to manufacturing, one example of this would be the production of a ready industrial labour force in northern Italy’s industrial triangle during the post-War years, achieved through the wide-scale facilitation of migration from the rural south of the country. Within the *immaterial* sectors of production examined in this dissertation (telecommunications, call centres, software production), we have seen how in each of the separate cases the production (and reproduction) of such a labour force is a relatively recent but vital quality of the political-economic context. The key way this has occurred is through formal, generally public, education, of which all three sets of workers had very high levels in fields ranging from chemistry to history. In Rome Collettivo member Cecilia Benedetti joked ironically about the usefulness of her degree in art history in the context of a call centre, a comment that reminds us of the steady stream of university students swelling the banks of the Atesia evening shift (Cecilia Benedetti interview). In New Brunswick, virtually all of the interviewees held undergraduate degrees, a factor that is becoming the norm for call centre workers in the region. In Moncton, Philippe Roy recounts that upon entering the company shortly before the merger “I saw a lot of faces that I recognized from university. […] They had] different backgrounds, lots of backgrounds: Commerce, arts, science, engineering” (Philippe Roy interview). On the west coast of the United States, the new generation of Microsoft workers had high and constantly evolving levels of education, a condition that characterizes other knowledge work positions as well (Kotamraju 2002).
In each of the three case studies, the most obvious “social forces” of the production of immaterial labour – schools, colleges, universities - are generating the type of labour necessary for the information economy. These skills are often technical, linguistic, and involve problem solving. But companies such as Atesia and Aliant also draw on cultural know-how, sensitivity, and the ability to manage affective relationships with people in a desirable way – communicative and emotional problem-solving in other words. For this reason, Cecilia Benedetti’s art history degree was arguably an important part of her work at Atesia, or at least until she began to organize collectively and was fired for it. At that point management was able to hire another student for the nightshift, perhaps one with a passion for the sonnets of the Trastevere poet Gioacchino Belli, or the prose of modernist author Giacomo Leopardi. Be this as it may, what we are faced with in these case studies is some of the first stable and plentiful versions of the types of workers required by capital for its new industries. The arrival of real subsumption of the telecommunications, software, and call centre industries is, in other words, marked by the arrival of a new type of worker.

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63 As immaterial labour comes in different forms however, there are varying production sites for such a workforce. With Dallas Smythe, I would suggest that another key site for the production of immaterial labour is in our living rooms, where popular culture works relentlessly to produce the flows of affect characterizing, for example, social networking sites.

64 I am not suggesting, like Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976), that the establishment of public schooling and the rapid development and expansion of the secondary school system of education during Fordism was, from the beginning, a plot to create a labour force for immaterial production. Rather, as Vercellone (2006) has pointed out, the achievement of universal public education was a victory for organized labour under Fordism, an appeasement offered in the face of the explosive and ultimately uncontainable demands made by the mass worker. Nonetheless, when capital faced its deep crisis in the 1970s, post-Fordism made a virtue of necessity and submitted the vast knowledge and competences produced by decades of public education to the development of surplus value.

65 As opposed to Braverman (1999), I do not believe that the real subsumption of immaterial labour necessarily results in routinization and completely degraded forms of knowledge work. (Footnote continues on following page)
Much as the manufacturing worker in the United States found out in the early twentieth century with the arrival of the assembly line however, the reorganization of the labour process over the last ten to fifteen years in information and telecommunication markets has also meant the institution of a system of power relations within them which severely frustrates the ability to organize collectively. The case studies are important, therefore, in that they highlight the first formidable barriers to collective organization by digital workers under post-Fordism. Two of these I would like to discuss in particular as manifest in all three cases: a) the growing disjuncture between models of industrial relations premised on the Fordist compromise and the post-Fordist relations of production, and b) the mobility of capital, or the constant threat of labour outsourcing as a disciplinary mechanism.

A key problem facing would-be organizations of knowledge workers is that the legally acceptable form of unionism that emerged during Fordism to advance the collective power of labour is steadily becoming less viable for the digital economy. This has occurred as a result of legislative changes regarding employment, the restructuring of these companies, the arrival of a new labour force, or a combination of these elements. Within the cases we have examined, that of the Microsoft agency contractors offers the most obvious example of this incommensurability. Faced with the fact that one Microsoft employee could be working for up to six different employers, and that two permatemps sitting next to each other could be performing the exact

This observation is too simple, and immediately faces one with too many obvious exceptions when looking at the varied world of immaterial labour. There is little question that capital would like to do the same with immaterial labour as it has done with material, indeed it does so whenever it can (call centres are the obvious examples). Yet to suggest that this is a law, and that (Footnote continues on following page)
same job but technically not be working for the same boss, the identification of a bargaining unit, not to mention the development of a company-by-company Fordist organizing model, became virtually impossible. At Atesia there was an even more extreme example of this disjuncture, in which, for all intents and purposes, the law banned union representation for the proliferating number of parasubordinate workers amid the call centre industry. In the Canadian Maritimes, which on the surface appeared to offer the most welcoming space for state-mediated industrial relations in the telecommunications sector, the rapid transformations of the labour process as a part of Aliant’s restructuring, when coupled with the state-subsidized development of what is in essence a large-scale immaterial maquiladora in New Brunswick, means the material basis of the CEP’s bargaining power has been, and continues to be, eroded.

These barriers to the collective organizing process are not, as liberal-democratic theorists of the knowledge worker might suggest, the result of a benign marriage between markets and information technology, but, rather, absolutely intentional reactions to previous forms of collective organizing and/or wage demands by workers. In Italy, the legislative imposition of more flexible employment relationships on workers through the 1990s was put in place chiefly at the request of capital in the newer, immaterial sectors of the Italian economy, which employed them most vigorously. In the Microsoft example, the institution of a permanent relationship with temporary employment agencies had the effect of distancing the likes of Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer from unrest associated with exploitation (lower pay, lack of benefits, exclusion from the social life of the company, etc), displacing such tensions into another realm where there is no history of collective organization. Finally, within the newly privatized and convergent Canadian this necessarily produces a proletariat akin to the industrial one, is to pick up on the weakest (Footnote continues on following page)
telecommunications sector, employers were not about to allow labour the power it had achieved within the old public monopolies. One has only to consider the Telecommunications Workers Union’s 1981 occupation and autonomous operation of the telephone exchanges in Vancouver during a strike against its monopoly opponent BC Tel (Mosco and McKercher 2006) to know what the potential threats of militant collective organization might be to Canadian telecommunications companies.

The transformation of the labour process, in the more cutting-edge companies like Atesia and Microsoft, also appears to have engineered solitude into the very core of the worker’s day. As Microsoft tester David Larsen suggested, barriers were erected between part and full-timers at the company (David Larsen interview). On the other side of the planet, Alessandro Petricca of the Collettivo echoed this discussion of communicative isolation, suggesting that the fragmented nature of their labour process had created a very different type of social relationship from that marking Fordist labour (Alessandro Petricca interview). Indeed one of the bitter ironies of these post-Fordist workplaces is that, despite being the setting for virtually permanent conversation and the production of affect, they seem to preclude much horizontal communication between colleagues or channel them into conversation that is productive for the company. Needless to say, the ability to communicate with colleagues, no matter what the sector or era, is at the base of collective organization, acting as its oxygen.

In addition to this, as witnessed most prominently in the Microsoft inquiry, the mobility of capital is proving to be a fearsome disciplinary measure against the spectre of organizing.

moments of Marx’s thought, where he is at his most teleological.
Organizations as different as Microsoft and Aliant have carried out broad-based restructuring of production with one of their express intents being to achieve the ability to farm out fractal pieces of the immaterial production process, thus routing around workforces’ wage expectations or propensity to organize. As WashTech treasurer Karen Bartley points out, Microsoft’s restructuring and its imposition of flexibility on one third of its Seattle workers during the 1990s meant that, by the arrival of the twenty-first century, it was able to invest heavily in the Indian subcontinent and China, offshoring positions internationally after having used domestic outsourcing as a kind of small-scale experiment for the process (Karen Bartley interview). There is also the eloquent example of the TaxSaver unit, which declared itself a “bargaining unit” during the turmoil at Microsoft, and was promptly shut down and outsourced as an immediate defence and a long-term warning. For its part, Aliant is merely trying to do what Canadian telecommunications companies BCE and Telus have already done - shift portions of their productive process offshore in order to flee the wage demands and/or levels of organization of its Canadian labour force. The ability of workforces in other parts of the world to speak the same language obviously plays a key part in the disciplinary process of outsourcing (hence the increased focus on English and technical skills in regions aiming to capture offshored immaterial labour). Yet even in the case of a language as limited by the borders of its nation-state as Italian, and therefore one that appears to offer barriers to capital’s perpetual desire to flee labour organization and wage pressures, there are escape routes. Alberto Tripi’s COS group, owner of the Atesia call centre, in an attempt to take advantage of old and new global migratory flows, recently set up call centre operations in Argentina and Romania, a project that no doubt aims to produce the future conditions to hold its immaterial labour force hostage to the threat of flight. This strategy means the study of international approaches to organizing resistance in the field of immaterial production is becoming an increasingly important field (Mosco and Stevens 2007).
Faced with a combination of these three factors – the production of a new type of worker, the imposition of logistical and juridical barriers to their potential collective organization, and the permanent threat of flight if that potential is actualized - it is perhaps surprising that this dissertation’s inquiries have any struggle to inquire into. Indeed, this research has examined what are some unlikely outbursts of labour organizing, given the conditions in which they occurred. As a result of the new and very serious barriers to the composition of immaterial labour, therefore, the cases of collective organization enacted by the digital workers at the heart of this dissertation are, by necessity, experimental and tentative. In the words of customer service and sales representative Jim-Bob Chaloux, who had just finished describing the effects of convergent restructuring at Aliant, “there’s so much change in this industry, that it’s hard to see what’s the truth, the path to follow” (Jim-Bob Chaloux interview).

Before reflecting on the results of these experimental combinations of knowledge workers against the new barons of immaterial production, however, I would like to focus on one quality that has emerged as a central feature in all three cases examined - what I am calling the memory of struggle. The memory of struggle is not a disguised version of class consciousness, although it does involve, at some point, a collective articulation of exploitation. Rather, the memory of struggle, as it is employed here, is similar to a kind of labour organizing equivalent of the physiological process of neuromuscular facilitation, or, more simply, “muscle memory.” Beyond the simple development of fine motor skills (in activities such as combing hair, typing, etc), muscle memory is developed in relation to considerably more complex physical activities, such as playing an instrument, a sport, or riding a bicycle. In the latter case, while we are not born knowing how to ride a bike, through repeated systematic engagements we train our muscles and brains to perform a set of actions predictably, efficiently, and in the face of a range of
contingencies contained within the layout of the physical landscape, the rules of the road, physics, etc. The memory of struggle, in other words, allows us to carry out actions on the basis of strategic decisions, but also on the basis of having performed and refined those actions in the past.

In all three of the case studies there was a pronounced lack of a memory of struggle on the part of these workers upon entry into their respective post-Fordist workplaces, one that was often supplemented by a dubious historical memory of labour peace between knowledge workers and the corporations they worked for. A part of this is no doubt due to the sustained ideological attack the very notion of collective organization has been subjected to with the onset of neoliberalism, one in which liberal-democratic discourses of knowledge work have played their part by offering a positive vision of information age labour relations. Often the lack of a memory of struggle stemmed from a self-professed apathy and a lack of interest in politics. All of the Collettivo PrecariAtesia members except for one described themselves as being broadly apolitical upon entry into the Roman call factory. This condition is oddly similar to that of high-tech work - WashTech organizer Karen Estevenin described her previous colleagues at a high-tech firm in Seattle as believing that unions “were for factory workers and farm workers” (Karen Estevenin interview). A virtually identical condition is true of the Aliant call centre workers in New Brunswick, who were swept into the CEP by a regulatory decision that was beyond their control. These employees had had little experience of collective organization, or at least very little they felt was congruous with their work. Philippe Roy answered the question of why there had not previously been a union among clerical workers at NBTel by suggesting it was “just the mentality that, we were going to do the job without complaining and that there was no need for unions - that was the initial mentality in the clerical world in New Brunswick” (Philippe Roy interview).
Occasionally this lack of direct experience with collective organization and the belief that
unions were for the manufacturing sector were combined with distaste for the excesses of Fordist
unions, or their perceived focus on insignificant issues in the workplace. Josée Thibodeau, who
was briefly a member of a union at an Air Canada call centre before moving to NB Tel, explains
that her experience had been a negative one because “the union was fighting to wear ball caps in
call centres instead of fighting issues” (Josée Thibodeau interview). WashTech member and
Microsoft employee Brian Globerman, who is a demographic exception among his colleagues in
that he was older than most, and a political exception in that he has links to a previous cycle of
militant struggle in the 1960s, expresses a combination of ingrained distaste for the questionable
positions taken by established labour in its recent history (such that of the International
Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers and Seattle Professional Engineering
Employees Association on overtime for high-tech workers) and a belief that that collective
organization was limited to manufacturing:

Well I’m giving away my age here, but when I was a teenager I
was involved in anti-Vietnam war protests, but actually I had a
negative view of unions because I remember at the time the
AFL-CIO was solidly pro-Vietnam war and especially the more
blue-collar unions like construction workers were avidly pro-
war, so I just wanted nothing to do with unions. I guess too I
also saw myself as a technologist, and as a professional, and
unions were for trades… (Brian Globerman interview)

The diminished presence of a memory of struggle among these workers, then, stemmed from a
few factors. Most were new to the industry and had no experience of collective organizing within
it. This may have been supplemented by the presence of beliefs we encountered in our
examination of liberal-democratic theories, namely that unions were for Fordism and
manufacturing, not the knowledge society and immaterial production. Often they pointed to real
problems within the established trade union movement, whether it was a lack of solidarity for
other sectors of labour, or a simple inability to connect with, and remain relevant, to the lives of its members.

### 7.3 The Organizations of Immaterial Labour

Despite my emphasis on the lack of a memory of organization among the knowledge workers in this dissertation, the goal of the inquiries that have been carried out is not to map out the ways in which collective organization is a chimera within digital capitalism, but rather to explore the ways in which it is working so that these can be extended. Having offered a historical context for the struggles of these workers through an analysis of the process of the subsumption of immaterial labour, characterized the three forms of collective organization they are adopting as experimental, and outlined some of the barriers these forms are facing, I close the chapter, then, by cautiously venturing into the realm of the prescriptive, considering the ways in which, for emerging collective organizing by cognitive workers, we can use the lessons offered by these and other cases strategically. These considerations, I believe, necessarily pass through an engagement with two relationships that have emerged as key ones within the case studies – the relationship between moments of collective organization by immaterial labour and established trade unions, and that between immaterial labour and precarity. Both of these, in their own way, mean addressing the relationship between immaterial labour’s composition and its organization.

As Daniel Bell theorized in the 1970s, the question was not whether the organization of professionals would be a major factor within what he called post-industrialism, but, rather, what form it would take. Capital, of course, does its best to organize immaterial labour as it wants through its transformation of the labour process, something that has been documented extensively.
in the three case studies. But immaterial labour, in its different compositions, can, does, and will organize for itself. By equating labour struggle with the fortunes of established trade unions in the labour movement, liberal-democratic theorists have, since Bell, provided themselves with the answer they wanted, that is, with evidence of the declining relevance of labour struggle and collective organization within the information society. Thus if we keep our sights entirely trained on how established unions are adapting to a changed environment, we run the risk of only telling part of the story, missing the emergence of other forms of organization and of other antagonistic voices. As a result, this dissertation examines three cases of collective organization that certainly include established unions, but through an immanent analysis that begins from the specific composition of labour in each setting. As has been suggested, collective organization always holds the potential to overflow the established channels of collective bargaining, themselves a part of the institutionalization of capital-labour relationships during the twentieth century. This notwithstanding, one of the key strategic questions for collective organizing within immaterial labour is its relationship with established labour.

Despite the limited experience of struggle characterizing the workers in these inquiries upon their arrival into their digital workplaces, in each of the three cases organized labour offered a potential reservoir of strategies and tactics. In the development of WashTech, for example, the King County Labor Council, itself a tangible result of the successes the established labour movement consolidated during America’s Fordist period, provided a nexus for disparate Microsoft contractors who were beginning to feel the need to act, and connected these with the world of organized labour. In the Atesia case, Cobas and the confederal trade unions also offered models to the parasubordinate workers of how to organize within the call centre. And for the new Aliant clerical/call centre workers, the arrival of the CEP after the merger provided them with the
strategies they would draw upon in the 2004 strike. In each of these cases, then, the model of organization adopted was directly affected by the workers’ encounter with organized labour and the reservoir of memory of struggle offered by the latter.

This fact, of course, is nothing new within the world of labour organizing, nor is it particular to post-Fordism. Struggles have always been passed on through institutions formed by those involved in the struggle, and there is no cause to believe immaterial labour is an exception. Yet to focus entirely on the flow of memory, techniques, and tactics from organized labour to new workers is, as suggested above, to leave out a vital part of the development of collective organization. Indeed these case studies demonstrate that the presence of the strong memory of struggle embodied in the presence of a union in a workplace is not necessarily an advantageous presence in all cases. The lack of direct experience with labour organization was not a disadvantage in some of the cases examined – quite the opposite. As several others of the Collettivo Precari suggest, the group’s strength initially derived precisely from their *inexperience*, a space that was quickly filled with experiments tailored to their situation, or more precisely, to their composition. Remember how one of the first actions the CPA took was to self-educate on precarious contracts and share this knowledge with others in the call centre, an act that informed the organizational model they developed. Similarly, the lack of a memory of struggle not only did not hinder the formation of WashTech, but by all accounts it determined the organization of the open-source union’s innovative form after the CWA was confronted with the existing composition of immaterial labour at Microsoft. The notion of a memory of struggle does not, therefore, pass through a vision of the established labour unions (such as the CEP, the CWA, the Italian confederals, and even rank-and-file unions such as Cobas) as guardians of labour struggle whose role is to pass on the agenda to rebellious but green digital workers. Rather, the cases in
this dissertation have demonstrated, crucially, that Braverman’s stream of labour resistance flows in the other direction, emerging from the existing compositions within labour. The Aliant struggle, for example, is arguably a case that demonstrates how an excess of memory can, while offering a clear model of how to act, lead to paralysis in the elaboration of new models of struggle, or new forms of collective organization. Here the CEP’s adoption of the model of convergent trade unionism certainly secured a collective agreement for workers, but it is also being routed around in a transformed productive landscape, its material base of support slowly eroded and re-engineered out of existence. The CEP has, in clinging to a Fordist, company-by-company model of labour organizing, tended to ignore the composition of immaterial labour within the broader call centre industry in New Brunswick and the Maritimes. In similar fashion, the Atesia case offers a situation in which the unions offering the deepest well of memory of struggle – CGIL, CISL, and UIL – were also the least active around the issue of precarious employment, adopting deeply contradictory positions that were, in the end, unsustainable. The established labour movement, therefore, can exercise a kind of monopoly of knowledge in the area of collective organization, acting to suppress different sorts of labour organizing.

I am not suggesting that established trade unions act solely as a regressive force with respect to “pure” instances of self-organization. This would be foolish, as established unions make real differences in the lives of working people, and in any case making hard and fast distinctions between established unions on the one hand and social movements on the other is a tricky endeavour, since these regularly overlap at the level of the rank and file. Rather, the strategic lesson to be drawn from these case studies is that, in its most promising articulations, the organization of immaterial labour is occurring at the intersection of spontaneous struggles by digital workers and a process – when it is present - of what some are calling “union renewal”
(Fairbrother and Yates 2003, Kumar and Schenk 2006) currently underway within the established labour movement. Two examples within the case studies and one from the broader labour movement offer a sense of how this is occurring.

The first is that of the CWA and WashTech. While the relationship between the 700,000-member convergent communication union and the upstart group of high-tech workers was also determined by specific barriers encountered to collective organizing at Microsoft (a distrust of unions, the inapplicability of a Fordist model of organizing, and so on), its openness produced genuine innovation in labour organization. WashTech may be encountering difficulties, as its continuing low membership indicates. Yet the organization, at the height of the struggles at Microsoft in 1998, also won key concessions at the company, whether or not it was unionized. The union was seen as a real threat by management, emerging as it did out of the composition of labour at the company. The model adopted is one within which, regardless of WashTech’s particular destiny, are therefore to be found the seeds of one variety of future organizations of knowledge workers. The ability to retain union membership across discontinuous periods of employment, and the sectoral approach to problems that are sectoral in nature, are key developments. The CWA, in a clear bid to renew its own activity within a shifting political-economic landscape, has offered WashTech space and autonomy in these endeavours and the financial support it needs. For a brief period of time, this intersection of old and new labour produced a different imaginary, and will act as a key reference point whenever a new spark is produced within the tech sector. In the case of WashTech, the established trade union movement acted as a connector, enabling new forms of organization and allowing a different set of social demands to flourish.
Similarly, the Atesia case offers an example in which spontaneous forms of organization came into contact with reservoirs of the memory of struggle they could tap into in the form of the rank and file union Cobas and the Assemblea Coordinata e Continuativa Contro la Precarietà. Both of these organizations had, as we have seen, worked to organize the digital assembly lines at Atesia for years before a spark was struck and the call centre burst into flames. Once that happened, these groups offered material support to the collective and encouraging the model of self-organization. The result was the development of absolutely innovative tactics, such as the flexible strike, and perhaps the most wide-ranging result achieved in any of the three cases we have examined, that of forcing the Italian state to change its employment laws within the call centre sector.

These new combinations within immaterial labour, occurring between emergent spontaneous struggles on the one hand and transforming unions on the other, are also resulting in innovative tactics outside of the case studies examined in this dissertation. One that I would like to mention is the growth of worker’s centres across North America (Fine 2006a, 2006b). Such centres are established in low-wage communities and act as resources, spaces for organizing, and skills sharing for workers. Efforts such as these are commonly described as "community unionism" (Cranford et al 2006a), or forms of collective organization occupying a middle ground between community activism and traditional trade union organizations (which are generally the primary source of funding for these centres). Rather than merely defending the rights of already-unionized workforces, these centres act as incubators for forms of future labour organization in sectors where there is the familiar disconnect between post-Fordist relations of production and Fordist models of labour organizing. As a result of this, in North America they are at the forefront of organizing within precarious employment, migrant work (including that of undocumented
workers) and that of recent immigrants. The Worker’s Action Centre (WAC), based in Toronto, is an excellent example of the kind of innovation that can occur at the intersection of the established power of organized labour and autonomous organizing within social movements (Cranford et al 2006b). The Centre, which is involved in advocacy work as well, has, once a week, drop-by sessions for workers in which the latter can find out what their options are if, for example, their employer refuses to pay them, or is forcing them to work in unsafe conditions. WAC offers personal consulting that will run through the range of possibilities with these workers, from pursuing legal channels, to connecting the individual worker with somebody from an established trade union, to picketing the place of work until the employer pays the money owed. In this way, workers then often become a part of the operation of the Centre, an immanent model of development that has allowed the organization to branch out into organizing within the Toronto Tamil community, around the ruthless practices of temporary employment agencies, and the exploitation of younger workers. In addition, the fact that the Centre is predominantly run by women of colour underscores their successes in reaching out to different compositions within Toronto’s urban workforce.

Such strategies, from the WashTech case, through the PrecariAtesia, to the worker’s centres burgeoning across North America, involve an open process of adaptation to post-Fordism, in which new forms of organization, subjectivities, and social demands are being produced. This process, I believe, is one we can think of as a post-Fordist organization of memory, one that arises from the changing composition of work rather than from the application of models of labour organizing that are progressively being routed around by capital. Beyond these encouraging adaptations to the new spatial and organizational challenges presented by immaterial labour, the
second key relationship to be considered within collective organizing by digital workers, however, is that with labour precarity.

One of the key themes running through this dissertation has been an exploration of the differences marking immaterial labour internally, differences which, of course, make organizing across them especially challenging. Yet organizing across the divisions imposed on immaterial labour by capital (Redmond and Hyderabad, one call centre in Moncton and another down the street, or call centres in Rome and others in Palermo) is essential to threatening capital’s emergent mobility and its attack on wages. Labour precarity, or the imposition of unstable employment conditions and generalized material insecurity for workers is, as we have seen, one of the central manifestations of post-Fordism in the world of labour, and offers opportunities for those wishing to work across the affinities and bridge these divides in the world of work (Brophy and de Peuter 2007). The concept of precarity, while not wholly unproblematic, has been taken up by a growing number of activists, researchers, and theorists in Europe, where it is closely linked to debates on immaterial labour. As the cases in this dissertation make plain, this linkage is due to the frequently strong relationship existing between the two processes. Precarity is a key material axis of immaterial labour’s composition, and each case examined here has brought this fact to the fore, albeit in a manner specific to its particular setting. As the PrecariAtesia and the WashTech cases have demonstrated most clearly, precarity has become, and can emerge in the future as, a powerful rallying cry and compelling aggregator for new combinations emerging between forms of union renewal and spontaneous organizing on the shop floor and elsewhere.

The organization of memory involves not only developing a kind of muscle memory for collective organization, but also the formulation of a new vision for a modified set of productive
relations. The WashTech example, of course, was one in which labour precarity was the central aggregating factor in the formation of the open-source union. As Barbara Judd said in the midst of the TaxSaver revolt, what Microsoft had created with its rapid transformation of the labour process and flexibilization of production, was a “permatemp culture” that soon became a breeding ground for the formation of America’s first high-tech union (cited in Ervin 1999a). WashTech’s strategy has, since the gains they achieved in 1998-1999, focused on a different kind of labour precarity, that produced by capital’s increasing ability to shift immaterial labour around almost at will. Indeed offshore outsourcing is the other side of the labour precarity coin, one that the Microsoft case study demonstrates in all of its clarity. The Collettivo PrecariAtezia case is another example of digital workers seizing on precarity and turning it into a banner under which to organize. The types of parasubordinate employment imposed on Atezia workers were a shameful attack by management on immaterial labour’s ability to organize and achieve a fair wage, but one that became a powerful producer of affinities in that case. So powerful has this call for resistance to the imposition of flexible forms of employment become within Italian rank and file labour and social movements that established unions have launched their own unions dedicated to precarious workers such as the CGIL-Nidil.

In the Aliant case labour precarity was present in one of its harshest and most threatening forms, outsourcing, in which employment itself is immediately at issue rather than the specific form it takes, or the modality of compensation it includes. Again this case is one in which

\[\text{Footnote continues on following page}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{66} In terms of the formation of subjectivities, there are signs of a widespread and growing temp culture emerging across North America. An early indication of this is the popular zine Temp Slave, by Jeff Kelly (1997), which includes articles, essays, and cartoons by temp workers across North America on their experiences in the flexible workplace.}\]

(Footnote continues on following page)
precarity became a key sticking point during negotiations, albeit articulated by the CEP in the traditional Fordist terms of job security. The case is an example of missed opportunities however, considering the strong links connecting vulnerable immaterial labour at Aliant and the steady churn of burnt out operators populating New Brunswick’s privatized call centre sector. As we have seen, capital has guaranteed its circulation through both of these sites, and seizing on this circuit would mean generating new forms of organization that respond to the specific composition of labour within this context.

The organization of a specifically post-Fordist memory of struggle through the generation of new demands surrounding the condition of precarity, is proceeding in imaginative and promising ways outside of the cases we have examined as well. One (predominantly European) example is the growing movement for a social wage, or “basic income” (Fumagalli 2006). Here an emergent formation of labour activists, critical economists, and radical theorists is putting the disjuncture between post-Fordist employment trends and (what is left of) the Fordist welfare system at the centre of a set of a new set of potentially explosive demands. These thinkers and activists point out that existing “workers’ rights” do not provide sufficient protection for the precarious labourer, and that remuneration schemes no longer accurately reflect work schedules (Lazzarato 2003). Rather than suggesting a return to the Fordist job-for-life and regular full-time hours as a desirable solution to the problem of precarity however, their calls are coalescing around the concept of “flexicurity,” a new form of social security appropriate to an age of labour flexibilization (Foti 2005). For example, the French precarious film workers, the Intermittents du spectacle, express a need for “continuous income for discontinuous forms of work” (Lazzarato
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in other words, if capitalism is increasingly structurally dependent upon intermittent work, capital must be forced to pay for its labour force’s off-work time. While criticized by some as a reformist project that is dependent on the perpetuation of the very state that engineered neoliberalism, these demands nonetheless embody a program of direct social appropriation of the wealth that is socially produced (Negri 2006, 21). This emergent organization of memory certainly draws upon some of the achievements of organized labour within Fordism, but projects these into the future without remaining beholden to forms of organization that are being routed around in the present.

The emerging movement for a social wage is therefore one example of a diverse set of struggles within which are to be found the seeds of future compositions of immaterial labourers organizing for themselves rather than being organized by capital. These forms, as we have seen, are experimental in that, operating within a radically mutated context, they necessarily seize on emergent qualities within informational capital (convergence, flexibility, mobility, etc). Certainly the forms of collective organization adopted by immaterial labourers in this dissertation cannot be understood as completely new. As Serge Mallet (1975, 35-83) described, collective organization itself has gone through endless iterations (guilds, labour unions, worker’s halls, soviets, etc) and therefore, in line with the genealogical approach we outlined above, the forms analyzed in this dissertation are always already merely the recomposition of older forms of worker organization into different, emergent, articulations. Thus the interesting question, the one this dissertation has begun the long process of examining, is what forms future collective associations of immaterial labourers will take, and how they will recombine and reinvent older forms in new articulations. For there has not yet emerged a type of capitalism that has not engendered resistance, and post-
Fordism, in its expropriations, its forced flexibilization, and its submission of language, communication and affect to the production of profit, will be no exception.
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Appendix A: List of Interviews

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