Global forces and national Institutions:

call centre work in Colombia

Anita Weiss

Anita Weiss is a professor of sociology and a researcher at the Centre for Social Studies (CES) of the Human Sciences Faculty at the National University of Colombia, in Bogotá, Colombia.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to contribute to the discussion about the relationship between global forces and national institutions, from a Latin American perspective. In addition to presenting some data about the diffusion of information and communications technologies in Latin America, we try to establish the relationship between some characteristics of Colombian society and the particular nature of the working conditions and employment relationships in call centres in this country, drawing on some exploratory case studies of call centres carried out in 2004, that formed part of a larger ongoing research project. It concludes that several features that are specific to the Colombian context appear to play a major role in shaping working conditions in Colombian call centres, including the particular characteristics of the labour market, the low regulatory power of the State, low compliance with labour laws, the persistence of the armed conflict that weakens all social and labour movements and the existence of a 'culture of distrust'. This suggests that the national institutional environment exerts an important role in shaping local working conditions, even when powerful global forces are at play.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to contribute to the discussion about the relationship between global forces and national institutions from a Latin American perspective.

In the first part of the article, we present some contextual information about the diffusion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Latin America. We then summarise some of the characteristics of national institutions and developmental trends in Colombia before presenting some results from our ongoing case studies of call centres in this country. Finally, we draw some conclusions about possible relationships between aspects of the national context and working conditions in the Colombian call centres we have studied.

The global forces we mainly focus on in this context are the dissemination and use of ICTs. In our discussions of the national institutional context we pay special attention to those aspects that seem to have the greatest potential for shaping call centre employment.

It should be emphasised that our research on call centres in Colombia is ongoing, and was not designed specifically to address the relationship between the Colombian national context and working conditions in call centres. Our conclusions are not, therefore, the result of systematic research into this linkage, but are intended as a contribution to the wider discussion about which institutions are significant in comparisons of differing national paths to a place in the information economy. This is an ongoing debate, triggered by some of the work on varieties of capitalism (Hall & Soskice, 2001) and developed further in European debates, including the analysis of the results of the EMERGENCE project (Huws, 2003). The relationship between global forces and national institutions was also a main discussion topic at the WORKS consortium international conference, in Chania, in September 2006 (Huws, Dahlmann and Dhudwar, 2007) and this paper aims to contribute further to this discussion.

The exploratory case studies carried out in Colombian call centres on which this article draws were conducted in 2004-2005 and formed a preliminary exercise prior to the development of a wider research project on changes in organisation and work linked to the use of ICTs in Colombian enterprises.¹ This wider study is now ongoing.

ICT diffusion in Latin America – the general context

As far as international organisations, like the UN Economic Commission for Latin American (ECLAC), are concerned, Latin American countries are in a stage of ‘transition towards an ‘Information Society’ or ‘Knowledge Society’ (ECLAC, 2003). The notion of a transition towards an Information Society as a new stage of development is based on theoretical perspectives that are close to the idea of a linear advancement in sequential stages, following a path already predetermined by the developed countries. Rostow’s (1990) concept of the stages of economic growth, and others like it, have often been criticised (Solivetti, 2005). In such approaches, the Information Society is viewed as a final stage of a development that started with the Industrial Society. This perspective is sometimes presented as a derivate of the theory of Daniel Bell (1973) about ‘the coming of Post-industrial Society’, although Bell does distance himself from the idea of an ‘Information Society or a Service Society’ as a final stage of a lineal and causal evolutionary process of society (Bell, 1976).

Latin American countries are certainly currently participating in the changes that are generally supposed to characterise the Information or Knowledge Society, but underdevelopment cannot simply be seen as temporary backwardness in a predefined process. Features seen as characteristic of different sequential stages in developed countries can be found simultaneously. A ‘superimposition’ of situations prevails, that correspond to different stages which in developed countries have characterised separate historical moments. There is enormous heterogeneity regarding the situation of the population, forms of production, income levels, and access to goods and services, resulting in conditions of poverty, insecurity and instability.

In many Latin American countries, large groups of the population have not been integrated into capitalist relations; the process of consolidation of a national state

¹ The case studies were conducted by the author with professor Edgar Valero from the National University of Colombia.

and the industrial revolution has not been completed in many regions; in some of these societies the authority of the state does not even cover the whole national territory and capitalism coexists with non capitalist or pre-capitalists ways of production. At the same time, these countries have to face the challenges of globalisation and of the scientific and technological revolution related to the changes that gave rise to the concept of an Information or Knowledge Society.

For this reason, in our opinion, Manuel Castells's (1998a) perspective is more useful. His argument that countries, regions and social groups have different probabilities of being included in the global Information Economy or risking remaining excluded and becoming irrelevant as producers or consumers describes the situation of Latin American countries and of particular social groups more appropriately than the idea of a supposed transition towards an 'Information Society' conceived as a stage of development.

Helio Jaguaribe, a Brazilian sociologist who also criticises the concept of development as a lineal process, places different countries in a similar perspective to that of Castells with regard to their power relations. He defines their diverse situation in relation to several dimensions: domination, autonomy, resistance capability or dependency in global market relations (Jaguaribe, 2001).

Even though some studies have tried to establish a relationship between the use of ICT and economic growth, or between ICT and poverty eradication, in the discussion about the Information Society many authors agree that the introduction of these technologies alone will not solve the problems of underdevelopment if other basic political and structural changes are not introduced.

The discussion about the scope of the Information Society concept is still open, and will be enriched by the results of empirical studies into the use of ICT and the relationship between its introduction and the changing nature of inequalities and power relations inside and between particular societies (Druetta, 2004).

Latin America in international comparison

The economic dominance of the triad made up by Europe, the USA and Japan is well known. Between 85% and 90% of the added value of high-technology manufactured goods is produced and consumed in North America, Western Europe and Japan.

Most foreign direct investment originates in and goes to industrialised countries. The headquarters of 90% of the biggest transnational corporations are in developed countries (UNCTAD, 1998). As far as spending on R&D is concerned, 84% comes from developed countries and only 3.1% from Latin America. Five countries account for 85% of registered patents. In 2003, the participation of Latin America in world trade was 4.6%, while that of the United States was 17.3%, and that of the European Union was 38.6% (ECLAC, 2004a:41).

Although we have to bear in mind the special characteristics of individual Latin American countries, as well as the inequalities between and within countries, we can point to some general trends in the changes that have taken place in Latin America in recent decades.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Latin American countries started to introduce changes in their development policies, which had previously been based on protectionism and

import substitution. Following the basic interests of multinational corporations and the pressures of financial agencies, the economies of Latin American countries were oriented towards the international market and their economies were opened up to imports, monetary flows and investments of foreign capital. This 'opening' showed up the fragility of national industries that had grown in small and protected markets and how difficult it was for them to compete in globalised markets.

The first steps involved opening trade to imports, financial liberalisation, deregulation of the economy and the privatisation of public services. During the first years of this process an increase in the flow of goods and capital led to an increase in imports and in the consumption of imported goods. Because the 'opening' was not accompanied by the creation of a new production structure, the most fragile segments of the productive base were destroyed. Production chains tended to disintegrate, and companies increasingly imported finished goods and inputs that had previously been produced locally. Imported capital goods were directed mainly towards the modernisation of privatised energy, communications and banking services.

In a second stage of this process, starting in the mid 1990s, after periods of economic and financial crises of varying intensity in different countries, an increased emphasis was placed on the promotion of exports, in response to a reduction in demand and import capacity. As a result of a decrease in capital flows, Latin American countries had to resort to external resources and savings, and this led to an increase in foreign debt. As a consequence, the fiscal deficit also increased. Countries had to make economic adjustments imposed by international financial institutions as a condition for receiving loans and economic support.

By mid 1998, the economic recession had progressively spread to almost all Latin American countries, cancelling out the effects of twenty five years of moderate economic growth. Most Latin American countries had a small or negative GDP growth rate and suffered frequent economic crises.

In varying degrees, all Latin American countries have had to deal with weak domestic demand, a high public debt burden, external vulnerability and insufficient linkages between exports and the rest of the economy. Until 1998, foreign savings were the most dynamic component of Latin American economies. Such savings grew from 0.6% of GDP in 1990 to 4.5% of GDP in 1998, and then decreased until they reached a negative value. This meant that part of domestic savings were used to reduce foreign debt, to finance the outflow of capital and to create international reserves, rather than to build up domestic capital (UNCTAD, 2004).

Latin America, with all the particularities of a very diverse continent, has been integrated into the global economy in a subordinate position. However, the ability of different social groups to establish links to the global economy varies.

Large economic groups that diversified their investments were formed during the period of import substitution. They accumulated more capital than they invested in the domestic economy. In the new stage of globalisation, some of these groups, which dominate strategic sectors in every country, joined big multinational corporations, bought privatised public service enterprises and started diversifying their investments into different countries. Thus, the heterogeneity of the production structure has

increased, with an increasing differentiation between the growth possibilities, competitiveness and internationalisation strategies of the large companies belonging to these economic groups, subsidiaries of multinational corporations and small and medium enterprises oriented towards the domestic market.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) in Latin America has increased. It accounted for three quarters of capital flows going to developing countries during the 1990s. This FDI has gone to existing enterprises, through acquisitions and mergers, rather than towards the creation of new enterprises. FDI grew much faster than domestic production. The share of transnational corporations in sales in Latin America increased from 30% in 1990-1992 to 41.6% in 1998-2000, while the share of state-owned enterprises went down from 32.5% to 17.1% (ECLAC, 2004b:34).

The large economic groups and multinational consortia invested mainly in existing service enterprises that were more profitable and had the possibility of rotating capital faster and with fewer risks than green field investments in the production sector. Globalisation has brought about the growth and consolidation of leading multinational corporations and their increasing penetration in Latin America. These corporations are wealthier and more powerful than the economies of many of the countries where they do business.

Nearly half of the 100 leading enterprises in terms of sales in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2000 were fully or significantly foreign owned. More than two-thirds of these companies announced job cuts, many specifically relating to jobs located in countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (Carlson, 2002).

Although there has been economical growth in recent years, huge sectors of the population have not been reached by its benefits. Besides higher rates of unemployment and underemployment, there has also been a growth in the informal sector and what Castells calls the 'fourth world': people who are integrated into the economy through illegal, criminal and violent activities. During the 1990s, seven out of every ten new jobs were in the urban informal sector (ILO, 2000)

The informal employment sector, which includes domestic workers, low-skilled workers employed in establishments with ten employees or fewer, self-employed workers (excluding professional, administrative and technical workers) and family workers, accounted for 47.4% of urban employment in Latin America in 2003, 4.6 percentage points higher than in 1990. According to ILO data, the non-agricultural informal sector grew from 42.3% in 1990 to 46.5% in 2002 and affected mainly women. The poor represent between 40% and 60% of the population in most Latin American countries.

According to ECLAC, in 2002, 44% of all Latin Americans had an income below the poverty line (that is, less than twice the cost of a basic food basket) and 19.4% had incomes below the extreme poverty line (income insufficient to cover the cost of a basic food basket). The percentage of poor people in urban areas of Latin America reached 38.4% in 2002, compared with 61.8% in rural areas, whereas 13.5% of urban dwellers lived in extreme poverty, a figure that was nearly three times higher (37.9%) among rural populations (ECLAC, 2004). Globalisation has widened the salary gap in both industrial and developing countries, but the gap in Latin America has widened

even more rapidly, and the region's extreme income differences lie at the heart of the largest per capita income inequality in the world (ILO, 2005).

The flexibilisation of labour legislation, the lack of employment opportunities in the formal sector and the growth of the informal sector have led to increasingly precarious employment relations.

Labour policy reforms concentrated on reducing total labour costs through the flexibilisation of labour contracts and the simplification and cost reduction of the dismissal process. Small firms and microenterprises generate a significant portion of employment and constitute the largest share of business establishments in Latin America. In general, they generate poor quality employment in terms of productivity, earnings, stability and access to social protection, among other factors. The proportion of wage labourers who work without a contract or with a temporary contract, as well as the number of people who have no social security has increased in most Latin American countries. Waged and salaried workers with social protection coverage decreased from 66.6% in 1990 to 63.6% in 2003 (ILO, 2005).

It is not surprising that the increase in unemployment and informal sector employment, along with the low income levels recorded in Latin America and the Caribbean, have exacerbated the problems of inequality and poverty.

Since 2004, the economy has recovered in most countries in the region, with growth rates between 4% and 10%. These changes were a consequence of the general growth of the world economy and of the increased demand for natural products and raw materials, rather than a result of the policies or structural changes in the economies of individual countries.

Since the benefits of the reforms of previous years that had been expected and promised did not materialise, public discontent increased almost everywhere in the region. This has led to major political changes in most Latin American countries in the last few years and to the establishment of more socially oriented governments. These governments have introduced a range of measures, with differing degrees of radicalism, in order to dismantle most of the neoliberal reforms. Following neo-Keynesian orientations, these reforms aim at creating a 'protective' state, through the restoration of its regulatory power and the search for agreements with enterprises, labour unions and various social organisations.

These reforms aim to increase the levels of social inclusion for most of the excluded population, through active labour market policies, better employment practices and the introduction of unemployment insurance and benefits. The new governments have also proposed changes in access to education, income distribution and tax structures and the extension of social security coverage, among other things (Carretón, 2007).

In many countries there is a growing awareness of the need for reforms to encourage production and service activities with higher added value, to strengthen the domestic market, and to re-integrate value chains with national or regional suppliers, whilst enhancing the greater global competitiveness of national economies (Berg & Auer, 2006).

At a conceptual level, new proposals have been formulated in Latin America designed to stimulate thinking about the possibility of building a new socio-technical paradigm, combining the potential of the Information Economy with a new social model, the

‘Labour Society’ (Godio, 2005). These concepts and the results of the political practices of the continent may enrich the debate about the ‘Information Society’ and its challenges in the future

The dissemination of ICTs in Latin America

When the EMERGENCE eReadiness database² was set up in 2000, using data from the mid to late 1990s, most Latin American countries were classified as ‘e-losers’. On the basis of international comparisons, the attractiveness of these countries as a destination of relocated employment from developed countries was comparatively low. Nevertheless even in ‘e-loser’ countries, the dissemination and use of ICTs has brought about major transformations. It is believed by some that the ‘digital divide’ in Latin America is even greater than the difference in income distribution. The digital divide has to be seen as a consequence of the social, economic and political disparities at global, national and local levels.

Table 1 shows some comparative indicators of the diffusion of ICTs in some Latin American countries compared with selected G7 countries. This comparison shows that Latin America’s share of spending on ICT, the number of telephone lines, the per capita number of computers and internet users, is less than 5% of the world total (although it should be noted that fixed telephone lines are increasingly substituted by mobile phones in all countries).

Table 1 ICT Indicators for selected Latin American and G7 Countries

Country	ICT spending in US\$ million (2001)	per capita spending in US\$ (2001)	no of tele-phone lines in '000 (2002)	no of tele-phone lines per 1,000 pop. (2002)	no of comp-uters per 1,000 pop. (2002)	no of comp-uters in '000 (2002)	internet users in '000 (2002)	internet users per 10,000 pop, (2002)
Latin America								
Brazil	50,031	287	38,810	223.2	13,000	74.8	14,300	822.4
Mexico	19,211	196	14,975	146.7	8,353	82.0	10,765	1,044.7
Argentina	11,642	310	8,009	218.8	3,000	82.0	4,100	23,000
Colombia	10,434	231	7,766	179.4	2,133	49.3	2,000	23,000
G7								
USA	812,635	2,924	186,232	645.8	190,000	658.9	159,000	5,513.8
Japan	413,772	3,256	71,149	558.3	48,700	382.2	57,200	4,488.6
Germany	154,645	1,880	53,780	651.6	35,600	431.3	36,000	4,361.7

Source: Data from the International Telecommunications Union, ECLAC, and the UN; analysis by the author

² This database groups together some important statistics relating to population, labour force, GDP, education, ICT, etc. which indicate how well equipped each country or region is in terms of information technology infrastructure, skills, and ITC workers. (<http://www.emergence.nu/erdb/index.php>)

On most of these ICT indicators, Brazil, the largest Latin American country, has less than 10% of the levels found in the United States (ITU, 2003). G7 countries spent an average of US\$ 262 million on ICT, while Latin American countries spent only US\$ 17million. At the end of the 1980s, Latin America had an average of 70 telephone lines per 1000 inhabitants, while developed countries had an average of 500 installed telephone lines per 1000 inhabitants. In the 1990s, the average in Latin America went from 110 to 200 lines per 1000 inhabitants, while G7 countries reached an average of 600 lines per 1000 inhabitants. In 2002, there was one computer for every 30 persons in Latin America and the Caribbean, while in the USA there was one computer for every 4 persons. This is related, among other things, to the price of computers compared to the average income of the population; (4) In 2000, of an estimated 304 million people who used the internet, 45% were in the USA and Canada, 27% in Europe, 23% in Asia and the Pacific. This represents 95% of all Internet users. Only 3.4% of all internet users were in Latin America, in spite of the fact that 8% of the world's population lives in this region (Díaz Granados, 2004).

The differences between countries regarding these ICT indicators are similar to other indicators, such as GDP, foreign trade or investment in research and development. Therefore, even though ICT allows the integration of some Latin American groups, countries and regions into the global information economy, the structural distances from developed countries persist.

Despite the relative backwardness of Latin American countries, the growth rates of ICT use in the region are among the highest in the world. One of the main hopes for new development opportunities in Latin America is related to the possibilities of benefiting from the offshore outsourcing of jobs from developed countries in the next few years.

A range of studies stress the growing importance of this trend. For instance, Forrester Research, in 2002, estimated that over the next 15 years, 3.3 million US service sector jobs would move offshore, representing \$136 billion in wages. The same study concluded that 473,000 IT jobs would have gone offshore by 2015, representing 8% of all IT jobs in the US (Corporate Research, 2002). Another Forrester Research report states that offshore service spending in Western Europe will grow from EUR 1.1 billion in 2004 to EUR 3.6 billion in 2009 (quoted in Huws, Dahlmann & Flecker, 2004). It has been estimated that offshore outsourcing has been growing by 25% annually.

The export of US jobs was originally focused on secondary operations such as call centres and transaction processing. Now it also includes financial analysis, accounting, the production of economic reports and graphic design. The main reasons for this trend are related to the need for cost savings, but, besides relatively cheap labour, US companies seek the advantage of the proximity of Mexico and other Latin American countries to the USA. Labour in some Latin American countries is supposed to be even less expensive than in India (López, 2003).

Forecasts of future trends in outsourcing to Latin America reflect the disparities between countries. Within Latin America, in 2000, three countries – Brazil, Mexico and Argentina – produced 75% of Latin America's GDP and 72% of its industrial added value. Brazil has 35% of Latin America's total GDP, Mexico 37%, and Argentina 17.4% (Interamerican Development Bank, 2000). According to a newspaper article by Michael

Schroeder (2003) Mexico and Brazil are the countries that would benefit most from the outsourcing of financial jobs from the USA to Latin America.

A study by Datamonitor calculates that, by 2008, 83% of the total transferred call centre agent population of Latin America will be in Brazil and Mexico (quoted in di Martino, 2004).

Representatives of the software development industry see this field of activity as one of the most promising for the future of Latin American countries. According to some researchers, however, the advantages of Latin American countries for the establishment of this industry and its potentialities for the promotion of development are mythical (Borello et al., 2004).

Following India's example, several Latin American countries have promoted the development of the software industry, hoping to find a new line of exports and a way to modernise their countries, in the belief that the software development industry can enable countries to compete not only by means of the low cost of labour and lower added value activities, but also through activities with higher added value and knowledge (Hualde & Gomis, 2004). There are, however, indications that Latin America's existing disadvantages in the international division of labour are not modified by the use of ICT or the development of a software industry in Latin America. A study carried out in Argentina on the use of ICT in industry concluded that it does not modify traditional organisational models and, therefore, has less impact than was initially expected (Bocherini et al., 2003).

Studies of the software development industry in Mexico and Argentina as well as data from Colombia, suggest that the market for software products is strongly segmented. The customers for the most complex operations, which have the strongest potential for software and IT development, are the biggest firms and multinational affiliates, and these projects are entrusted to foreign suppliers of IT solutions, while less complex projects, for medium or small firms, are sourced from domestic suppliers (Borello et al., 2004).

As incentives for these activities, some Latin American governments have offered ten-year tax exemptions for software development, financing for training programs and participation in the organisation of regional technological parks.

Some studies show similar organisational patterns of software development industries in a number of different countries. One common feature is the organisation of technological parks defined as regional development poles. A second is cooperation between local and national governments, telecommunication and IT companies, technical institutes and/or local universities and IT providers through the formation of joint clusters. A third common characteristic is a predominance of medium and small companies that tend to form clusters in order to develop joint projects together, as groups. Finally similar employment relations are to be found, whereby employment is linked to individual projects and not to the firms themselves and cooperation between workers and firms is temporary and sporadic (OEA, 2004).

The directives of IT industry associations in the region present the low cost of labour in Latin America as a comparative advantage for attracting relocated IT-related functions. But in order to compete through low cost the region's double disadvantage

in the globalised economy has to be faced. As has already been noted, not only are its wages higher than those of its poorer global competitors, but at the same time its skill levels are lower than those of its richer global competitors and even of some of its poorer global competitors (Carlson, 2002).

Nevertheless, although the international position of the software development industry is still weak in most Latin American countries, an important learning process has been associated with this industry and there are many development prospects related to the diffusion of ICT across a diverse range of activities in each country.

Call centres in Colombia

In this section we draw attention to some specific features of the Colombian national context that we consider relevant for a discussion of working conditions in Colombian call centres.

Manuel Castells differentiates Latin American countries according to the way they are integrated into the global economy. Colombia has in his view a 'perverse connection to the global economy through drug trafficking' (Castells, 1998b:190 ff). According to Castells, Colombia's situation is exceptional because of the economic stability it enjoys in spite of the high degree of violent strife. In his view the only explanation for this lies in the influence of the drug trade. In Colombia many economist disagree with this explanation. Nevertheless, Colombia's situation cannot be understood without taking the drug trade and its relationship to armed groups into account. We are not going to discuss the subject in this paper, but it is related to a range of questions including the difficulty of attracting more foreign investment, increased capital outflow, increasing investments by Colombian economic groups in other Latin American countries, the weakness of the State and its inability to control the whole national territory, and the persistence of an armed conflict that weakens all social or labour movements and creates a situation of uncertainty and distrust that has an impact on the economic development, the political atmosphere and the international competitiveness of the country.

Colombian GDP represents 0.30 of the world's GDP and 4.3% of total Latin American GDP. Colombia has an average share of 0.20% of total world exports and 0.26 % of total world imports (Onudi report, quoted in Bonilla & Ricardo, 1998:176). Colombian GDP was US\$ 82,400 million in 2003 and rose to US\$110,000 million in 2005. GDP has grown at an average rate of 1.5% in the last 10 years, and between 5% and 6% since 2004. The sectoral distribution of production in 2005 was: 14.4% in agriculture and mining, 23.3% in industry and 62% in services. Historically the service sector has grown as agriculture has decreased, not only in terms of employment but also of production.

When the Colombian economy was 'opened' in the 1990s, the backwardness of its production structure became evident, as well as the big differences between existing practices and those needed to meet international production standards.

During the protectionist period, Colombia never defined which products it should protect in order to reach an internationally competitive level. In the same

way, this 'opening' process was carried out in a pragmatic and indiscriminate way, by liberalising imports, capital flows and foreign investment. In this period, as in the other Latin American countries, production for a small and protected market encouraged the consolidation of big economic groups that diversified their investments under the leadership of financial capital. Thus, an oligopolistic industrial and financial structure was created. Some authors consider that there has been a process of de-industrialisation in Colombia during the last 10 years. Prices for imported intermediate inputs and final goods that were cheaper than their internal production costs led to a substitution of imports for manufacture, converting many industries into traders of goods they once produced, and disintegrating providers' value chains, with the consequence that imports have grown more than exports. FDI in Colombia has also flowed to existing enterprises through acquisitions and mergers, rather than contributing to the creation of new enterprises. Investment is mostly oriented towards privatised public services like energy, telecommunication, finance and commerce, and natural resources like oil, rather than to production. Colombia mainly exports natural resources with low added value, agricultural products and a few industrial products. The main export products are oil, coal, nickel, gold, coffee, fruits, sugar, textiles, food and leather goods³.

Colombia's industrial structure is very heterogeneous in relation to size, share of total production, degree of informality and income differentiation.

In 2003, 87.3% of all production units (82,629) had fewer than ten employees and were classified as belonging to the 'informal sector'. These accounted for 24.5% of all employees. In the 'formal' sector, 70% are small companies with fewer than 49 employees. These employ 21% of the workforce and contribute 13% of production; 23% are medium sized companies with 50-199 employees, employing 31% of the workforce and contributing 27% of total production. Companies with more than 200 employees are considered large. They account for 15% of all enterprises, 64% of the workforce and 75% of production (Colombian Economic Census, 2003). Nearly half (49.3%) of industrial production is of consumption goods. In recent years investment and growth have mostly been concentrated in privatised service activities like energy, telecommunications, finance and trade. Agriculture, mining and industry have shown a decline in growth.

A weak State that cannot protect its citizens and guarantee compliance with labour legislation in the so-called 'formal' sector is also, not surprisingly, responsible for a weak welfare system and irregular industrial relations.

Only 55% of the workforce is covered by social benefits, usually in large and medium companies or the public sector. The lack of workers' benefits is not limited to the informal sector. According to the IDB, it affects 50% of all Latin American wage earners, a third of whom work for medium and big enterprises (Marquez, 1999)

In Colombia, 31% of all employees were working without a contract in 2003, and 38.5% had no social security. In companies employing fewer than five workers, 62.5% had no social security (Cámara de Comercio de Bogotá, 2004). Temporary employment and sub-contracting have increased since 1990, encouraged by labour reforms that allow greater employment flexibility.

3 Production and export of coca and its derivatives is not included in official accounting. It has been estimated that its value is around 3% of GDP

In Colombia, as in other Latin American countries, one important characteristic of the labour market and job structure is the increasing weight of the informal sector. The increase in labour market participation in recent years has been accompanied by an increase in under-employment and informality. Informality in large cities has grown from 43% in 1990 to 53% in 1994 and to 63% in 2005. In small towns and rural areas it may account for 70% of all employment. The proportion of wage earners decreased from 54% in 1997 to 46.8% in 2005, while at the same time self employment increased from 34% to 38% (Farné et al., 2006).

Economic growth has taken place against a historical background of poverty and inequality. In 2003, 20% of the poorest people received only 2.7% of total income, while the richest 20% received 61.8%. Over half (51%) of the population in urban areas is considered to be poor. In rural areas the proportion reaches 63% (United Nations, 2004). 80% of the total capital on the Colombian stock market is owned by 0.21% of shareholders. Meanwhile, 60% of households in rural areas have no land property at all, whilst 2,428 persons, (0.005% of the population) own 54% of rural property (World Bank, 2005).

In Colombia, as in Latin America in general, labour policy reforms since 1990 have concentrated on cost reduction and the simplification of the dismissal process. This has encouraged the substitution of temporary and precarious employment relations for permanent jobs. In 2005, 49% of all employees were working without a written contract and only 35% had a permanent labour contract. Flexibilisation and deregulation presuppose the existence of institutionalised norms and laws that regulate employment and working conditions. In a certain way the Colombian labour market has always been 'flexible', because labour laws were applied mostly in big companies and the public sector. In small firms and micro enterprises, labour laws have never been a necessary reference for actual practices (Weiss, 1997).

Small firms generate a significant proportion of national employment and constitute the most extensive share of business establishments. Generally speaking, such companies generate poor quality employment in terms of productivity, earnings, stability and access to social benefits. In these companies, there is frequently low compliance with basic legal rights at the workplace.

Since 1974, employment in the secondary sector has been around 15%. In 2005, 531,000 persons worked at 7,000 industrial establishments with more than 10 employees (the formal sector); of these only 59% had permanent employment contracts. In the primary sector, employment rates decreased from 43% in 1974 to 24% in 2005, whereas in the tertiary sector, in the same period, employment increased from 43% to 61% (Farné et al., 2006).

These figures demonstrate that the phenomenon known as 'tertiarisation' may mean something very different in underdeveloped countries, like Colombia, than in industrialised countries. In Colombia, industrial employment has never accounted for more than 15% to 18% of all employment. The service sector has been the biggest employer for a long time and has increased while employment in the primary sector has decreased. The increase has mainly taken place in the trade and service sectors. Seven out of every ten new jobs are created in the informal sector, which has reached 60.7% of total employment in the thirteen biggest cities. New employment possibilities

are concentrated in commerce, transport, communication and personnel services, following the tendency of substitution of permanent employment by temporary and precarious employment. Eight out of ten of the new jobs are generated in these sectors; and six out of ten new jobs belong to the informal sector (Farné et al., 2006).

In 2005 the total population of Colombia's comprised 43 million people, of whom 20 million represented the economically active population: 17 million were in work and three million 'not occupied' (DANE, 2006).

Urban unemployment increased from 9% in 1995 to 20% in 1999 but has been decreasing since 2000, reaching 12% in 2005. Unemployment is only partially a result of economic growth based on modern technology and high productivity. It is much more due to a lack of development and modern production, which means few new work opportunities in the formal economy. As large enterprises tend to increase productivity through technical modernisation and rationalisation processes, the hope of new employment opportunities is linked to the strengthening of small and medium enterprises and expansion of the service sector. Underemployment went up from 26% in 1997 to 37.4% in 2005 and is related mainly to insufficient income.

Industrial relations in Colombian enterprises tend to be individualised. In many enterprises formal collective bargaining is being replaced by labour agreements that depend on manager initiatives and are only apparently the result of collective negotiation. Workers who have fixed-term contracts do not join trade unions because they fear that their contracts will not be renewed. Trade union membership, as a percentage of all people employed, has decreased from 7.3% in 1993 to less than 4% in 2004 (Ríos, 2005). The weakening of the labour movement and workplace organisation is not only related to labour market dynamics, the consequences of changes in labour laws and employment practices, but has also been influenced by the armed conflict that prevails in Colombia. This conflict has restricted collective and social movements, inhibited their development, and generally caused repression.

The feeble individual and collective negotiating power of workers is related to the weakness of the State's power of regulation and the failure of compliance with current legislation. Neither the state nor its laws can effectively regulate citizens' coexistence all over the country. The State does not have a monopoly of armed force. This is reinforced by Colombian geography: 75% of the 43 million Colombians live in the central and western highlands; 54% of the territory has only 3% of the national population. There are remote places, mainly away from central and western regions, where violent armed groups, reinforced by drug trade trafficking, substitute for the state and impose their own laws.

The weakness of the legal system can be related to a high degree of impunity. Approximately 70% of crimes remain unpunished, including the breach of labour laws. The existence of a law does not mean that it is implemented. These circumstances have not only generated abuse and corruption but also a widespread culture of distrust: distrust of compliance with the law; distrust of institutional authority; and, at the enterprise level, distrust of managers' practices and of workers' performance.

Research on industrial workers (Weiss, 1998) has found that even in large cities like Bogotá where a sixth of the Colombian population lives, the state does not represent what Norbert Elias calls the 'survival unit'. For Norbert Elias (1995:166) 'survival units' are

structures of interdependencies among individuals that provide security and a means of survival, as well as control of violence and the defence of human rights. Following Elias, changes in survival units correspond to a process of civilisation and individualisation. The state, the family or any other social group, as a survival unit, are conceived as sources of protection and defence that provide physical and social security. The state as a survival unit has the function of protecting citizens against violence and disaster.

The Colombian State does not provide a minimum income to all citizens sufficient to cover at least the cost of basic needs such as food, education, living and general survival. There is no equivalent of unemployment insurance and the ability to meet basic needs depends mainly on the possibility of finding a job with a regular income. This study of work histories and workers' subjective expressions (Weiss, 1997) led to the conclusion that in Colombia, for industrial workers, the 'survival unit' is not represented by the State but by family, friends and 'regional' solidarity networks. This crucial role of family and personal relationships is linked to the prevalence of low income and the need for support in periods of unemployment or times of adversity. In this context, individualisation is a synonym for enhancement of liberty and autonomy only for a small group of citizens, while for the majority it represents a situation of helplessness and powerlessness (Castel, 1997).

Results of the call centre study

In order to gain a first insight into working conditions and employment relations in ICT-related services, we carried out an exploratory study in Colombian call centres. It is impossible to know exactly how many call centres there are in Colombia, partly because many of them are in-house dependent departments. According to the president of the Colombian Call Centre Association, in 2003 the Association had 31 members that employed 15,000 agents. Each independent call centre employs an average of 70 to 80 workers. Only four centres have more than 1000 employees. The sector grew by 72% in 2000, by 56% in 2001, and by 36% in 2002⁴. In the context of the general characteristics of the Colombian labour market and the fact that six out of every ten new jobs created are in the informal sector, call centres are important because they represent one of the few new employment opportunities existing in Colombia's formal sector.

Five case studies were carried out, in companies referred to here as A, B, C, D and E.

Enterprises A,B,C and D are call centres providing, respectively, home delivery sales, customer service, public information, counselling and advice services and data collection from customers. Enterprise E provides information processing services and involves activities relocated from Spain. This is not strictly speaking a call centre but was included in the study because, like call centres, it is an example of 'knowledge-based' work that can be relocated offshore using ICTs.

In the call centres we visited that were outsourced, the main reason for outsourcing mentioned by executives was to reduce labour costs and to obtain a better use of the technological infrastructure by selling services to several enterprises.

Call centre A is one of the biggest call centres in Colombia. It has 1,500 positions and 2,500 workers. Specialised departments are headed by 180 administrators and six senior managers. It provides customer and sales services to several companies.

4

Interview with Ricardo Durán L, Presidente de Asociación Colombiana de Call centres

It is owned by the two large companies who are also the customers for most of the services provided. One of these is a public telecommunications company that has not been privatised, and the other is a Colombian publishing company that has branches in several other Latin American countries, edits telephone directories and offers information services to the public.

Call centre B provides home delivery and customer services. In 2003, it was insourced to the marketing department of its parent company after three years as an independent company because it could not sell the expected services to other clients. At present, it is a department of a supermarket chain that was bought by a Spanish transnational corporation. This centre receives sales orders for home delivery in four Colombian cities. Its 44 agents work in two shifts.

Call centre C provides information for about 42 institutions related to Bogotá's City Hall. Requests for information and complaints are answered by email and fax as well as over the telephone. The company provides a special communication service for deaf people. It is planned that in the future Centre C will be integrated as a special account into Call centre A. The number of agents varies between 40 and 60, depending on the time of the year and the number of campaigns currently running.

Call centre D is organised as an 'in-house' independent enterprise that provides customer services to several different companies belonging to the biggest Colombian newspaper. It also collects information from clients of other companies belonging to the same group. This information is sold by the parent firm. The centre has 150 employees, 40 of whom are administrative officers.

Company E operates as an information technology training institute and provides information processing services to a Spanish affiliate of a global corporation. This activity is a relocation from Spain. Four hundred persons work from their homes for Company E, which provides this service to the Spanish contractor. Three of the eleven staff members are managers, three are secretaries, and the remaining five on-site workers are students who review the work sent in by the teleworkers from their homes.

The call centre directors interviewed said that they hoped in the future to expand, extending the services provided both domestically and to other countries. In their view, their competitive advantages were based on a combination of factors including: the quality of human resources; the neutral accent of Colombian Spanish; good technological infrastructure; the geographical location of the country; and, in particular, the low cost of labour⁵. In the words of the head of the Call Centre Association

'Call centres compete with each other by reducing labour costs, which represent 70% of their total costs'

All the directors interviewed stressed the importance of low costs and their intention of competing as the lowest cost carrier. The over-riding importance of cost containment has an impact on the organisation of work, the use of technology, and the human resources policy.

The contradiction between low pay and employment instability, on the one hand, and service quality, on the other, that has been pointed out in some studies carried out

5 Interview with the President of the Colombian Call Centres Association, May, 2004

elsewhere in the world (Bittner et al., 2002) does not apparently worry the managers of Colombian call centres. We did not notice any efforts to encourage labour stability or to avoid high turnover of personnel in any of these centres.

In the call centres we studied, work is carried out collectively, by groups of workers, in office premises. The only exception was case E, where text processing is carried out by individuals working from their homes. Working from home using ICTs does not seem to be common in Colombia. One manager considers that 'it is difficult for housewives to find enough time to do their work'. Another thought that 'workers do not have enough discipline to work at home'.

Most call centre agents are female students under the age of 30. When asked about the preference for women, the managers interviewed did not consider that gender segregation was inherent to the job. One director said that:

'Women are more careful, have better manners, are more dedicated and disciplined than their male colleagues, and can stand monotonous and stressful work better.'

However night shifts are staffed by male agents, for security reasons, because they have to go home late at night.

Being a call centre agent is considered a suitable job for college students because it allows them to choose their working hours and, as one manager said:

'Students are young, educated persons with social competencies, they are willing to serve, they are not afraid of new technologies; they have a good memory, and learn fast.'

Another remarked:

'Their income prospects are lower than those of professionals. When they finish their studies, they look for another job'

Whilst a third informed us that:

*'Students consider their income as a supplement to help finance their studies and not as a means to earn a living.'*⁶

Agents have a different point of view. They work at a call centre because they 'need to work'. In order to earn enough money, some agents work at two different call centres or have a different second job.

Another reason why students are recruited as agents is that they are already somewhat qualified:

*'By choosing students, we are already selecting people who can afford to go to college and whose living standard allows them to have access to computers; they have a higher educational level, social skills and learning habits'*⁷

It should be noted that only 18% of Colombians between the ages of 18 and 28 reach higher education level.

Working conditions in Colombian call centres

A description of the operations and the organisation of Colombian call centres shows similarities to those analysed in other studies (Guimaraes Larangeira, 2003).

6 Interview with the directors of call centres A,B and C

7 Interview with the director of call centre C

Because there is a global dissemination of technology and software, Colombian call centres are organised according to the universal parameters found globally. In several companies we visited, the technology and software are purchased from transnational corporations like Avaya, and the databases and their maintenance are provided by Oracle or Microsoft.

As in call centres elsewhere, Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) is used to distribute calls among agents, who then consult databases containing the information needed to answer the questions posed by customers. This technical device allows a high degree of transparency regarding the content of the calls and the performance of the agents. There is a constant flow of information about the frequency, duration, pauses, and content of all calls. Coordinators and managers use these statistics to evaluate the performance of agents and as a basis to adjust the number of agents and the flow of services.

Compared with the results of Batt et al. (2000), the organisation of services provided by the call centres that were included in this study follow more exclusively the principle of maximising call volume and minimising labour costs using performance metrics. The most frequent standard was 80/20: 80% of the calls should be answered within 20 seconds.

Information is used by managers predominantly for electronic monitoring of agents' work. Databases that help employees in their interaction with clients are not considered as a way to enhance workers' discretion in their activities. On the contrary, this information is simply used as the basis for monitoring the agents' performance, so they have to look it up, even if they know the answers by heart. Consulting the database during a call is a step that is monitored by the system. Every week the records are evaluated by the coordinator or by the person in charge of monitoring the agents' performance by listening to their calls. A large number of performance indicators are generated every day for each operator. In call centres A and C, coordinators decide how many agents will be needed the following week. Those agents who get the lowest scores are dismissed if there is not enough work for everybody. In call centre C, the number of agents varies monthly between 40 and 60. In call centres A and B, the number of agents is more stable. In call centre A, it depends on the number of incoming calls and on the campaigns and services that are sold to other companies. Agent turnover is high at some call centres because they are constantly adjusting to changing needs. Colombia's 'flexible' labour legislation and low employment opportunities facilitate part-time and contingent work practices. Databanks containing information about agents that can be hired at any point in time are available to companies.

The fact that agents are constantly being monitored can be linked to the existence of labour relations based on mistrust. Typical responses from managers we interviewed included:

'If we did not monitor them, agents would stay logged off and calls would be in line much longer. The presence of the coordinator and direct supervision are important because performance is not internalised by employees. Without the coordinator, employees would not comply with the rules and standards, maybe as a reaction to pressure'

'Without the direct supervision of the coordinator, they would do whatever they want.'

'Students are young and open, but they are irresponsible.'

*'Workers (in data processing from home) try to cheat, but these attempts are discovered by the software and the people who check the texts.'*⁸

The agents perceive this constant supervision as a limiting factor.

'What is stressful is not so much that you have to answer calls all the time, but the fact that everything you do, every single step, is regulated and has to be performed in a specified way and time frame.'

'We know that our conversations are monitored. You can be pleasant and efficient during 80 calls, but if you fail once, and this is the call that is monitored and gets a mark, you risk losing your job'.

In the companies studied here there was no attempt to increase performance through incentives. The only means were through coercion, by withholding payment and threatening dismissal.

*'One mistake means a 1.5% reduction in the variable income and, if the conversation time is not completed, the salary is further reduced...'*⁹

In contrast with findings from the United States (Batt et al., 2000), Colombian agents do not have a margin of autonomy as an incentive for involvement and identification with the enterprise. On the contrary, all forms of control are used. The competitiveness of the enterprise is based on low salaries, and there are no incentives to avoid high staff turnover.

The most important recruitment criteria are communication and social skills, as well as familiarity with computers. As in other studies (Weiss, 1998) 'need' was also often mentioned as a selection criterion. 'People in need' accept precarious working conditions and are interested in keeping their job. A great number of people submit their CVs and, thus, companies have databases from which they can choose agents when the demand for workers increases. A 'shortage' of labour was never mentioned. Sometimes people who are a little older (28-30 years old) are hired for customer services because they are considered more 'responsible' than individuals who are only 18-22 years old. The need for a job, the lack of stable job opportunities, and working hours that are convenient for students are thought to guarantee good performance.

Because of the generally high qualifications of high school graduates and university students and the special emphasis placed on social and communication skills, agents who deal with the public and do not need special technical knowledge go through a relatively short training period. In call centre A, training takes 3 weeks. In call centre C, there is a two-week training period, but it takes an agent three months to really know how to use the databases of the 42 different institutions they serve. In call centre B, initially there are twelve days of training for the operation of home delivery orders and fifteen days for customer service training. Once the agents have learned to listen on the telephone, to use the

8 Interview with executive of call centre B

9 Interview with agents of call centre A

information provided by the databases and to write down orders at the same time, 'work becomes very mechanical'. This supports the description of work in call centres as tayloristic even when it takes place in modern sectors using ICT (Flecker & Kirschenhofer, 2002, Toomingas, 2005).

Work in the call centres we visited is very stressful and badly paid. A typical call lasts an estimated 2-3 minutes. An agent can handle 100 calls per day in centre D and 22 calls per hour in centre B, where there are 40,000 incoming calls per month and 1,500-1,800 requests per day. Agents have to answer calls by phone, consult the databases and, if it is a sale, write down the order during the call. Although the duration of calls has been specified, sometimes they are very long, especially if they are related to orders, because the duration of the calls depends on the clients.

In 2004, Colombia's minimum monthly wage corresponded to between US \$100 and \$120. In Call centre A, the salary was the equivalent of US\$180 a month for eight-hour workdays. In centre B, workers do not have a personal contract or social benefits; they are members of the pre-cooperative that acts as an intermediary between the employees and the company. The average monthly payment was US\$120 for 6.5 hours of work per day.

When Call centre B was insourced as a department of its parent company, one of the objectives was to cut costs. The general manager was replaced by a director of the department, two staff members were dismissed, and pay was lowered. New agents are being recruited from high school graduates instead of university students, because: *'High school graduates have less employment opportunities and are willing to accept lower payment than university students'*¹⁰.

Payment has a fixed component and a variable component that is based on performance. The variable component depends on the number of calls answered, the evaluation of items monitored and scored, and the achievement of the company's defined objectives. Some of these components depend on the performance of the company as a whole and not on the agent's individual performance.

In case E, payment depends on work delivered. The work consists of placing marks on legal texts sent from Spain for codification in XML language. No special knowledge of the content of a text is necessary in order to codify it. Employees can put marks on texts written in languages they do not fully understand, like Catalan or Vasco. They copy the text using a specialist program, review and mark the paragraphs. They do not need to write anything.

This company has a training centre where students spend a couple of weeks learning how to mark and codify legal texts, and then they can start working from home. A software program checks their work after it is finished. Workers have to meet certain targets: to go through 20 pages or 400,000 characters in two hours. The margin of error is 1 in 12,000 characters.

Recently the working process was modified in order to reduce costs. Approximately 200 persons used to work on the company's premises, but now they work from home and this helps to reduce costs:

'We do not care who does the work, as long as we get the required texts in the stipulated time and within the defined standards'

10 Interview with manager of call centre B

'The workers can sub-contract the work or let other family members do it'
'In Spain it is difficult to live on 1,000 Euros a month, but in Colombia it is enough for
three families',¹¹

As already mentioned, call centres represent one of the few existing employment opportunities in the formal sector in Colombia. New jobs have been created but the employment conditions of these call centre agents are precarious, with no stable contracts or full social benefits, following the general tendency of the Colombian labour market.

Few frontline workers are directly employed by the call centres, although directors, coordinators, technicians, software designers and engineers are usually hired directly by the call centres and have long term contracts and full social benefits.

Occasionally, agents are promoted to these positions, but 'good positions' are scarce and represent a promotion opportunity for very few people. Some agents stay in their posts in the hope of gaining access to jobs in the parent companies of the call centres.

Such differences between agents and upper employees in call centres reflect the segmentation of the labour market, where there is a gap between a core group of protected employees, most of them professionals, and a marginal group of workers with a very inferior level of protection. This labour market situation can be viewed as what Max Weber described as a 'class situation' (Weber, 1964: 54ff).

Approximately 180 out of 2,500 employees were transferred from the owners' parent companies to call centre A when the call centre was created. These and a few new agents received fixed term contracts, after having previously worked under several three- or four-month contracts, obtained through a temporary employment agency. This agency belongs to the same economic group that owns the call centre.

In case B, the centre that was insourced as a department of a big supermarket chain, agents are not employed by the company. When agents start working at the call centre, they become members of a pre-cooperative managed by the company's employee fund. These workers do not have an employment contract or full legal benefits. This form of recruitment allows Colombian companies to ignore labour regulations and to reduce personnel costs and obligations. Centre B used to be a family-owned company with 'paternalistic' labour relations before becoming a subsidiary of a Spanish transnational corporation. Workers had permanent contracts and several benefits, like education subsidies for themselves and their children, housing loans and a restaurant service. After the takeover, personalised treatment was replaced by impersonal contracts and distant relations. The flexibilisation of labour laws helped to introduce different kinds of contracts and labour relations. As one supervisor observed, 'Now what matters is low cost and not the workers' welfare'

In call centre C, the number of agents is adjusted monthly. Even though there are 40 permanent agents, changes in the requirements for agents mean that some of them must be dismissed. A more flexible labour legislation foresees contracts for 'concluded work', which allows the use of contingent work and hire and fire practices. For agents: *'The uncertainty is terrible. You can arrive one morning and find a letter on your desk saying that you are fired'...*

11 Interview with manager of company E

*'Our work contract allows us to be fired anytime'*¹²

In some cases, a high voluntary turnover was found. In other cases, as in case B, managers said that turnover was low because of Colombia's lack of employment opportunities. In this company, the agents said that most of their colleagues who are university students resign 'after six months'. One agent, who had been working there for two years and a half said:

'I am still working there, in spite of the bad working conditions, because I am a big conformist'.

As in many other Colombian enterprises and sectors, there is no unionisation in call centres, or any other form of collective representation or collective bargaining. The centres we studied do not have any institutional conflict-resolution processes or the possibility of filing complaints.

'Those who do not agree resign or simply do not come back'

'Groups of workers used to discuss problems and even occasionally decided not to answer calls, but at present the workforce is fragmented and everything is solved individually.'

*'The prevailing attitude is that one has to be thankful for having a job, and people are not willing to protest or to act collectively.'*¹³

Individual workers have little bargaining power. There are no collective organisations and administrative mechanisms for appeal in case of dismissal. This uncertainty causes even more stress than the working conditions and is an obstacle to greater commitment and responsibility.

The situation we have described coincides in several respects with those described in a Brazilian case study that showed a trend towards 'individualisation' and lack of collective bargaining opportunities. Nevertheless in Brazil there are call centres where workers belong to unions (Guimaraes Larangeira, 2003:17) while in Colombia there are none.

Conclusions

A number of general conclusions can be drawn from this study:

The global diffusion of technology and the predominance of big multinational corporations that dominate information technologies explain the similarities in the organisation and functioning of call centres worldwide. It is not just the technology, but also the organisational practices that are globally diffused. This can be verified, for example, in the employment of students as call centre agents.

However these global similarities are mediated by national differences. The labour market is one of the strongest national institutions and explains many of the particular characteristics of the working conditions and employment relations, in this case in Colombian call centres. Here, the practice of employment through cooperatives, non-payment of legal benefits, the extraordinary lack of stability, even in an environment where precarious forms of temporal and sporadic employment are common, must be related to the particular characteristics of the Colombian labour market. The low

12 Interviewed workers at call centre D

13 Interviewed agent from call centre B

compliance with labour laws can be attributed to the very low regulatory power of the state which seems to be another significant factor, when different national development paths are compared.

The workers' limited individual and collective bargaining power in national industrial relations in Colombia is related to the persistence of the armed conflict that weakens all social and labour movements. This points to the fact that many national differences are not evident in comparisons that take place only at an enterprise level and fail to take the larger institutional context into account.

The existence of a 'culture of distrust' illustrated in our study does not just have a subjective impact on workers and managers but also has organisational consequences, particularly in the definition of the degree of autonomy and control of workers' performance in call centres.

Looking more broadly at indicators of the comparative level of ICT use in Latin America, the national differentiation in software development activities or even in the working conditions in call centres, allows us to conclude that integration into the global 'Information Economy' takes place within the unequal structures characteristic of mutual and internal relationships in modern societies, where there are 'winners' and 'losers' in all processes.

This reinforces the importance of including inequality and power relations in the discussion about concepts related to the different paths individuals, groups, countries or regions follow to an information society.

© Anita Weiss, 2007

REFERENCES

- World Bank (2005) *Informe distribución del ingreso en Colombia*. Retrieved on October 15, 2006 from <http://www.minhacienda.gov.co>
- Batt, R, et al. (2000) *Telecommunications 2000, Strategy, HR Practices and Performance*, Ithaca NY: Cornell-Rutgers Telecommunications Project
- Bell, D. (1973) *The coming of Post-Industrial Society*, (reprinted with new foreword), New York: Basic Books
- Bell, D. (1976) *The coming of the Post-Industrial Society. A venture in Social Forecasting*. New York: Basic Books
- Berg, J.E., Ch. & P. Auer (2006) 'Cambios en el empleo en México y América Latina', *Revista Trabajo*, México: Centro de Análisis del Trabajo, December
- Bittner, S., M. Schietinger & C. Weinkopf (2002) *Zwischen Kosteneffizienz und Servicequalität: Personalmanagement in Call centren und im Handel*, Gelsenkirchen, Institut Arbeit und Technik. Germany: Rainer Hampp Verlag München
- Bocherini et.al. (2003) *Nuevas Tecnologías de Información y Comunicación. Los límites en la economía del conocimiento*. Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila
- Bonilla, R. (1998) *La eolítica internacional en eolítica industrial*, Bogota: Universidad Nacional-CID y Ministerio de Desarrollo
- Borello, J., A.Erbes, V. Robert, S.Roiter, & G.Yogel (2004) 'Technological competencies of Information Technology Workers. Beyond demand and Supply restrictions: the Argentinean Case' presented at the DRUID Summer Conference 2004 on *Industrial Dynamics, Innovation and Development*, Elsinore, Denmark, June 14-16
- Cámara de Comercio de Bogotá (2004) *Observatorio del mercado de Trabajo* no.11, September
- Carlson, B.A. (2002) *Job losses, Multinationals and Globalization: the anatomy of disempowerment*, Santiago de Chile: ECLAC

- Carretón, M.A. (2007) 'La oportunidad de lograr un avance institucional y social', *Página 12*, Argentina, March 23. Retrieved on March 26, 2007 from <http://www.pagina12.com.ar>
- Castel, R. (1997) *La metamorfosis de la cuestión social*, Buenos Aires: Paidós
- Castells, M. (1998a) *The rise of the Network Society*, London: Blackwell
- Castells, M. (1998b) *End of Millennium*, London: Blackwell
- Colombia Censo socioeconómico (2003) Bogotá: Departamento Nacional de Estadística, DANE
- Crovi D. D. (2004) *Sociedad de la información y el conocimiento: Entre lo falaz y lo posible*. Buenos Aires: La Crujía
- DANE, Departamento Nacional de Estadística (2006) *Datos del Censo 2005*. Retrieved 14 May, 2004 from www.dane.gov.co
- Díaz Granados, Jorge (2004) Web Page of the 'Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática, INEGI. Mexico. Retrieved, July 14, 2004 from www.inegi.gov.mx
- Di Martino, V (2004) *Telework in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Geneva: International Development Research Centre Canada. Retrieved on April 17, 2007 from http://www.idrc.ca/uploads/user-S/11005992271telework_final_feb1.no_conf.pdf
- ECLAC (2003) *América Latina y el Caribe en la Transición hacia una sociedad del conocimiento. Una agenda de políticas públicas* June, 2003. Retrieved on November 10, 2006 from <http://www.eclac.cl>
- ECLAC (2004a) *Desarrollo Productivo en Economías Abiertas*, San Juan-Puerto Rico, June-July:41
- ECLAC, (2004b) *Economic Report* United Nations, Santiago de Chile: ECLAC
- Schroeder, M. (2003) *El Tiempo*, Colombia, May 1
- Elias, N. (1995) *Fundamental Sociology*, Barcelona: Gedisa
- Farné, Stefano et al. (2006) *El mercado laboral y la seguridad social en Colombia entre finales del siglo XX y principios del siglo XXI*, Bogotá: U. Externado
- Flecker, J. & S.Kirschenhofer, S. (2002) *Jobs on the move: European companies relocating eWork*, IES Report 386, Brighton: Institute for Employment Studies
- Toomingas, A. (2005) 'Working conditions and health in call centres', in Gustafsson R. and Lundberg, I. (ed), *Worklife and health 2004*, Stockholm: National Institute for Working Life and Swedish Work Environment Authority
- Godio, J. (2005) *El paradigma de la sociedad de trabajo*, Argentina: Instituto del Mundo del trabajo 28.5.2005
- Guimaraes Larangeira, S. (2003) *The new reality of telecommunications in Brazil post-privatization: Cellular segments and call centres*, Porto Alegre, Brasil: UFRGS, Presented at the XXIV Congress of the Latin American Sociological Association, Arequipa, Peru
- Hall, P & D. Soskice (2001) *Varieties of capitalism, the institutional foundation of comparative advantage*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Hualde, A. & R.Gomis (2004) *La Construcción de un Cluster de Software en la frontera Noreste de México*, Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Tijuana
- Huws, U. (2003) *When Work Takes Flight: Research Results from the EMERGENCE project* IES Report 397, Brighton: Institute for Employment Studies
- Huws, U. S. Dahlmann & A. Dhudwar (2007) *The transformation of work in a global knowledge economy: towards a conceptual framework: conference report*, Leuven: University of Leuven Press. Available online on: http://www.worksproject.be/Gen_project_results.htm
- Interamerican Development Bank, (2000) *Annual Report 2000*. Retrieved, May 13, 2004 from <http://www.iadb.org>
- ILO (2005) *Generating Decent Work in Open Economies: The Strategy of Growth with Quality Employment*, Geneva: International Labour Organization,
- ITU (2003) *World Telecommunications Database*, Geneva: International Telecommunications Union
- Jaguaribe, H. (2001) *Latin America and the creation of a multipolar order*. Retrieved on August 24, 2006 from <http://www.sela.org>
- López, A. (2003) 'El sector de Software y Servicios Informáticos en la Argentina', in F. Boscherini, M. Novick & G. Yoguel (eds), *Nuevas Tecnologías de Información y Comunicación. Los límites en la economía del conocimiento*, Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila

- Marquez, G. (1999) 'Empleo en América Latina: Problemas y Perspectivas. Seminar presentation at *Empleo y políticas laborales*, Bogotá: Banco de la República, 9 July
- OEA (2004) *Colciencias Encuentro sobre Competitividad de las TICs en América Latina*, Bogotá: June 30
- Rios, N. (2005) *La Estructura Sindical Colombiana*, ENS, December 16. Retrieved on 25 March 2006 from <http://www.ens.org.co>
- Rostow, W.W. (1990) *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, 3rd Edition, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press
- Solivetti, L. & M. May (2005) 'W.W. Rostow and His Contribution to Development Studies: A Note', in *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 41 Issue 4:719-724
- UNCTAD (2004) *The World Economy: Performance and Prospects*, Geneva: United Nations Conference of Trade and Development
- United Nations (2004) *PNUD Report*, New York: United Nations
- UNCTAD (1998) *Annual Report*, Geneva: United Nations Conference of Trade and Development
- Weber, M.(1964) *Economía y Sociedad*, México City: FCE
- Weiss, A. (1998) 'El proceso de individualización de los obreros industriales en Colombia' in H. Perez (ed) *Norbert Elias, un sociólogo contemporáneo*, Bogotá: Fondo de Ediciones Sociológicas
- Weiss, A. (ed) (1997) *Modernización industrial: Empresas y Trabajadores*, Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Departamento Sociología,

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An earlier version of this article was published in Huws U., S. Dahlmann & A. Dhudwar (eds)(2006) *The transformation of work in a global knowledge economy: towards a conceptual framework: WORKS conference proceedings*, Leuven: Catholic University of Leuven.