Babes-Bolyai University
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Transforming Neoliberal Corporate Environments

Human Resources Perspectives in Postsocialist Cluj

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Abstract: My organizational study intends to further the understanding of power in labor relations by focusing on various displays of power, resistance and submission. I use my field as a device that affords theoretical insight into some novel interpretations of the postsocialist neoliberal ethos and the ways it operates in a Romanian company milieu, influencing individual employee's capacity to adjust, resist or exit and generating a particular power setting. Power's definitions of the work environment either capitalize on prevalent negative perceptions of socialist failings or are reproduced due to genuine neoliberal shifts within individual's 'entrepreneurial self' life experience. In addition, resistance is a narrowly personal response to what is a significantly controlling and coercive milieu. Therefore, the focus of my topic shows a political or ethical orientation, in search of more than personal, alleviating resistant solutions, but more general and inclusive modalities of subverting or reshaping power's straining normalizations.

Keywords: Organizations, power, subjects, resistance, neoliberal, postsocialist, hierarchy, engineers, gender neoliberalization, working time.

Contents

Main argument of the thesis

My research intends to further the understanding of power in labor relations by focusing on various displays of power, resistance and submission. It observes power expressions and subsequent reactions to power manifestations in ways of negotiating relations which involve extensive control or straining normalizations. I use an ethnographic in-depth study of a company as a device that affords theoretical insight into some novel interpretations of the neoliberal ethos influencing individual capacity to adjust, resist in some way or exit. These reinterpretations and individual readjustments, owing to employees' modalities of perceiving and being in the work environment, are observed both in discourse and in practices. Power's definitions of the work environment either capitalize on prevalent negative perceptions of socialist failings or they are produced as genuine neoliberal shifts within individual's 'entrepreneurial self' life experience. The spread of definitions of the different power situations bring about their ensuing resistant moves; still, I do not idealize resistance or any camouflaged opposition, but ponder on the rather diminished capacity for subverting mechanisms of control and discipline when lacking critical perspectives on the constructed nature of the all-pervasive taken for granted, such as paid work, hierarchy or competitiveness of the self. I show that impositions related to overtime or to 'having fun', together with the gendered distribution of work or the privileged managerial status can trace my research endeavors close to the critical management line of inquiry because of its general concern with dominance and control and, also, with the denaturalization concept, unveiling the constructed nature of the apparently neutral and scientific, taken for granted concepts in the capitalist organization. I focus on instances of neoliberal governmentality and displays of power through observing different groups of employees: engineers confronted with new neoliberal soft skill demands, women being commodified as a capitalist resource while transforming gender normalcy, informal party participants faced with opportunities and constraints reinforcing power relations and status differences and also managerial anti-socialist stands imbued with neoliberal interpretations in authoritarian practices and discourses.

Positioning in the literature

The construction of an *obedient subject* as an employee, who by receiving a wage is expected to submit to the control of another higher level in the constituted hierarchy of power, is continuously reproduced and faintly challenged, in a variety of ways framed by viewpoints of organizational studies. The modern corporation appeared as the main way of institutionalizing working relations. It shadowed in its path the former dominance of estate,

family and residential community. The practices of the corporate milieus came to influence everything from personal identity construction, time use and entertainment to the production of knowledge or news (Deetz, 1992:2). The study of organizations has traditionally dealt less with the concept of power, following a utilitarian move that came to dominate the most influential of the organizational studies, born and developed in the US business schools. Since mid century, themes of domination, power, conflict and authority have been replaced in the North American shift 'towards more instrumental and structural conceptions of organizations operating in narrowly conceived resource environments' (Lounsbury and Carberry, 2005:502). I posit myself in this thesis along the theoretical lines of inquiry belonging mainly to the critical theory tradition, which stand to support and accentuate the key findings of my research. Critical management study takes its breath from critical theory, which assumes the possibility of more autonomous individuals who can, in principle and in line with the Enlightenment's ideals, be the masters of their own destinies in collaboration with others – possibility that is thought to have become distorted and impeded by neoliberal managerial ethos (Alvesson and Willmott, 1994, 2002, 2003). Critical theory challenged the dominance of this instrumental rationality and sought to move the relatively narrow theorizing of both organization and management studies towards inclusion of wider social science developments. It shows the transformation of individuality into standardized forms fit to match the demands of mass production and mass consumption and it challenges the taken for granted assumptions of large bureaucracies, schools and the mass media, belonging to the same instrumental rationality which helps 'to reduce human beings to parts of a well oiled societal machine' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2003:2).

Methodology

My contentions are founded on an ethnographic investigation into the lived experiences of employees from a branch of a construction company activating in a large Romanian city in the field of construction of communication infrastructure. The company I draw my research from, founded at the beginning of 1998, expanded rapidly, only ten years later reaching over 200 employees, a turnover of over 25 million euro and developing branches in two other major cities in the country. I called the company Construct Energy, a pseudonym used together with chosen pseudonyms for employees, to prevent identification of the firm, its location or the people involved. Methodologically, I tried to rigorously systematize the large quantity of information obtained through diverse fieldwork techniques: co-participant observation covering a period between January 2007 to January 2010; textual analysis of company's internal newsletters, brochures-presentations of the company, newspaper

articles (written mostly by the CEO or by the PR manager and reviewed by the CEO); and interviews with employees and middle managers, organized after I left the firm, to clarify or confirm some understandings of field aspects. I gathered field material and assembled a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) to allow the first step in my interpretation of the corporate culture. The co-participant observation started at the beginning of 2007 as an employee in the HR department; it presupposed working mostly with middle and top management for recruiting projects and also having daily encounters with all employees in the PR and Accounting departments – located in the spatial proximity of HR, at the ground floor of the office building. During the three years' period I was able to write brief field notes during and outside office hours, which I organized and classified outside the office. Field notes provided the necessary tool to commit discourse and action to memory. Also, I was involved in work meetings and informal discussions with the CEO, top management, as well as employees, experience which afforded me the opportunity to understand working relations in the company, corporate culture dissemination and specificities of defiance practices. Ethnography allowed me to investigate how both common employees and managerial staff interpret their work environment; hence the researcher can grow an understanding of what is central, distinctive and enduring about their organization. After I resigned, at the beginning of 2010, I contacted former colleagues for interviews; I used a semistructured interview format. The interviews allowed a reformulation of some of the problems and a possibility of asking about any new developments occurring in the firm.

CHAPTER 1. About the Possibility of Critique after the Normalization of Work and the Naturalization of Hierarchy

I trace the most important cultural steps in the construction of both the benevolent hierarchy and the empowered neoliberal employee and retain and connect to theoretical stances which contribute to a critical understanding of power and resistance in labor. The corpus of critical management today is portrayed as particularly articulate (Clegg et al., 2005), even if it seems rather diverse and randomly penetrated by different 'conflicts' (Fournier and Grey, 2000). Nevertheless, its defining characteristics would be: an anti-performative stance, a dedication to a form or another of denaturalization and a reflexive approach to methodology. I can trace my research endeavors close to this critical management line of inquiry because of its general concern with dominance and control and with the denaturalization concept, unveiling the constructed nature of the apparently neutral and technological, taken for granted concepts in the capitalist organization. I also adhere to an anti-performative stance as this study's intent does not contribute in any way to productivity or efficiency, it is uninterested in them. As a denaturalization attempt I

investigate the managerial and more generally technocratic 'taken for granted', as these constructs are routinely offered in discourses given by the veritable bearers of rationality: managers and technocrats. Moreover, I found, in the company I have researched, other voices which used the same constructs derogatory, aware of the constructs' impositions of power. These other voices of employees are usually cast by the powerful managerial discourse as 'objects or instruments of managerial action' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2003:8). The army of technocrats seemingly provides 'real' knowledge, which is transmitted to managers to put it to good use and foster the betterment of the organization. Technocrats themselves, I argue, are empowered and disempowered in the same time; they are given the partial authority of knowledge in their respective domains and then they are sent back to being ones amongst other objects of managerial savoir-faire. I contend in the various chapters of the thesis, following the above mentioned critical management theorists, that narrow technocratic orientation limits and impedes human autonomy and responsibility.

CHAPTER 2. Imagining the Market and the State

I am interested in the modalities of imagining the market as natural and imperative and its desired relation to a subordinate, laissez faire state, as these views transform managerial expectations regarding proficiency and working habits in neoliberal ways, changing the working environment and setting higher, 'flexible' standards for employees and managers alike. The conceptualizations of the market-idea and their specific subsequent envisioning of appropriate market practices represent in *Construct Energy* powerful influences on decision making, representations about able managers and promising employees, and general power relations in the company. Three domains can be identified in *Construct Energy* that capture the way the owners and their close managers imagine the world of business, which gives clues to their managerial styles and working patterns, which explains the whole complex milieu that had been formed inside this successful Romanian-owned enterprise. These three include: imagining the market, the constraints and freedom it presupposes; imagining the state, its role in the development of the country as a whole; and the envisaging of people, their motives, goals and limits for action. The force of the market-idea comes from precisely this major quality it possesses: it is able to simplify and produce an easily understandable scheme of individual motives, social good, rational action. This concept orients thought and the constitution of the interested individual out of a choice for one passion (lucre) to counter all other damaging passions. The constructed nature of interest-based market and market per se is oblivious for capitalist players; the concepts seem natural epitomes of human rationality and are intensely fought for in discourse and in practice. State regulation is perceived as abusively restraining the drive of progress in society: the capitalist game.

State regulation colludes with the self-regulating market. Laissez-faire is advocated to produce the best results for the society of 'those who deserve it', while the idea of a minimal standard of living is considered to only favor a 'culture of dependency' – the cases that 'cannot be blamed for their condition' are, of course, exempted – they can nevertheless be addressed in more professional way by means of corporate social responsibility programs.

CHAPTER 3. Neoliberal Managerial Styles in a Postsocialist Environment

I follow the organizational discourses and practices used to sustain an active employee enrolment and the subsequent role assigned to leaders. Using insights from the managerial literature, which described the self-developing, inspiring neoliberal managers that should develop the right 'virtues' within themselves and also among their subordinates, I counter the assertion that capitalist enterprise needs positive justifications sustained by a new mobilizing generation of managers meant to ensure productive enrolment. Instead, I found that duress can still offer compliance, can attain submission, without positive engagement, especially if the neoliberal discourse is reinforced by a strong managerialist anti-socialist stand opposing capitalist virtues to socialist downfalls and producing languages of differentiation about employee adaptability; the tough authoritarian managerial method, yet autonomy impaired vis-à-vis the owner, is preferred due to supposed socialist inefficient and laggard employee mindsets. The anti-socialist pervasive discourse can still offer a basis to normalize pressure or extra-hours, and managers translate neoliberal discourse into local adaptations to force submission. Compliance is obtained through informal sanctioning, repressing resistance or stifling discontent. A neoliberal interpretation of freedom, i.e. to move to another firm if discontent, contributes to a perpetuation of a threatening work environment. Coupled with a powerful imprint of socialist inefficiencies, it helps produce conformity for managers, as well as employees. The model of manager resulting from this mixture is an authoritarian, self-made person, autonomy impaired and readily relaying superior's imperatives.

CHAPTER 4. Neoliberalizing Resistance: Working Time and Overtime Pressure

I addresses here the issue of framing working time and using time in the company, considering the adaptive logics of autonomous individualist employees that reconcile conflicting life priorities. I show that, in the case of the Romanian postsocialist context and its particular discursive constellation, the neoliberal parlance in the emerging local firms

opposes capitalist virtues to socialist downfalls; there are two types of employees, those adapted to the new conditions and those still bearing the socialist imprint. The most visible effect, that of obsessively controlling time and assuming time waste from employees, could be traced to socialist inefficient working-time, which implied spending time in factories, not necessarily working, and flooding the factory gates when program ended. The negative visual impact of dozens of employees leaving the factories at 4 o'clock sharp still burdens the new capitalist working time. Management reconstructs the capitalist 'adequate' employee as one who does not leave when program ends as if he/she waited impatiently the hour of departure, as it happened in communist factories. There is a whole set of techniques used by the managers to control and extend working time: manipulating time breaks (i.e. lunch time), promoting and paying better salaries to those who usually put in the hours, assigning tasks towards the end of the program, setting the stage for a permanent competition to find the most promising employees. The new neoliberal manager discourages and disparages discontent because negotiation or compromise is not an option. On the contrary, the self-interested employee is encouraged and empowered to choose between two rational options, either to leave an environment that proves inadequate to his/her desires, or to put in the hours. My point is that the employee is undergoing a significant transformation toward a neoliberal self-made person, committing to work in a pragmatic and self-interested fashion, leading to resisting by eluding resistance. Company environment is not changeable or negotiable for this employee type, he/she either accepts the norms imposed by management or decides to leave. As time is regarded, these autonomous individualists decide to work long hours where demanded and construct an adaptive logic that reconciles conflicting life priorities. I argue that resistance is becoming obsolete despite the fact that the work environment is pressuring for unpaid overtime, excessive hours and does not offer the neoliberal 'flexibility' concerning time management.

CHAPTER 5. Seeing Like an Engineer: A Corporate Milieu Dominated by Technical Cadres

The chapter portrays engineers as valuable company assets who are confronted with new soft skills demands and a marketable specific interactional savoir-faire that comes to contrast and question their technical superiority and strong hard science beliefs. I show that, as postsocialist capitalist companies undergo changes linked to their market constraints, the relations to their technical employees change accordingly. The engineers, even if considered valuable assets by the company, are expected to develop alongside technical knowledge a marketable specific interactional savoir-faire. This transformation collides with their most strong held beliefs in the absolute superiority of hard sciences. To recuperate for their profession a formerly much higher social and self perceived status,

engineers are forced into a new professionalization which implies accommodating soft knowledge in a previously all hard knowledge universe. I contend that even if engineers are themselves increasingly aware of the importance of social skills in their work, there is still a clear perceived hierarchy of qualifiers of excellence in engineering. The important traits seen as qualifying them as proficient in their jobs are customarily technical knowledge related and not involving social skills. In their mental hierarchies the best engineers are working on technical projects or design and require only the scientific knowledge higher education accentuated. But actual work involves, for most of them, only a dim use of technical knowledge and a lot of administrative and routine toil. The discrepancy between the real day-to-day work and the way they imagine a "real engineer's work" causes only frustration and feelings of disappointment in what is seen as professional drift. The new negative self-perception of engineers comes after a period of high status for them as part of the backbone of socialism. The post-war socialist enterprise needed technical knowledge to expand and innovate, nowadays the main concern for the neo-liberal capitalist firm being new market outlets, therefore many positions necessitate abilities to sell and please clients.

CHAPTER 6. Gender Neoliberalization Benefits Business: Femininity as Corporate Commodity

I discuss in this chapter women's roles and role playing in the company to reach an understanding of their neoliberal utility and commodification. Women employees are expected to be veritable entrepreneurs of themselves regardless of their position and authority in the firm; whether they have 'traditionally' female occupations or have surpassed the glass ceiling by climbing to the managerial status they should enhance skills and commit to continually improving oneself. Empowerment and self-identification of women in the organization occurries only insofar it benefits business; women are commodified as a capitalist resource. A redefinition of gender is underway in novel and unexpected ways; traditional gender normalcy is reshaped through corporate expectations and practices framed in the leadership discourse; neoliberalized 'femininity' in managerial position is not only conforming to previously conceived 'masculine' authoritative methods, but also ruthlessly enhancing control and domination. Feminine traits and 'qualities' are welcomed in an adaptive post-Fordist company and exploited in a neoliberal fashion to suit business needs. Yet, the case offers a novel interpretation of 'femininity' in managerial position as not only conforming to previously conceived 'masculine' authoritative methods, but also ruthlessly enhancing control and domination. Proving highly adaptive to perform jobs previously designed for men, successful women make excellent examples of neoliberal self-regulation, by tenaciously employing some of the feminine codes in combination with

the perceived 'managerial' traits, usually assimilated with men. In addition, the neoliberalization of women proves beneficial for corporate goals also; the company constructing new standards of prowess with the aid of this novel disciplined female commodity.

CHAPTER 7. Informality and 'Having Fun': Work Hard/Party hard

Facing critiques about the disappearance of fun from work, Fordist shop floor practices have been gradually altered by the post-70s efforts to reinvent capitalist work in a non-Taylorist fashion. A movement of making work more fun and informal, said to accrue benefits such as flexibility, competitive advantage and increased motivation The final chapter argues that mildly pleasant parties in the company are half-heartedly participated in as they informally retain the familiarity of power and gender relations in the firm. Informality gets imbued with the consciousness of authority only temporarily faking close relations towards the employees. The apparent greatest fun seems to be placed with some of the managers, whose authority tries to extend from the formal realm of the office to the informal party realm, imposing degrees of 'fun' and getting people in the partying mood. Authority is perversely transmitted at every company event by the eager members of the managerial team. Employees experience the party transformation of some managers from dictatorial figures to *'pals'* with irony, delineating themselves from some of the exaggerations. Employees' imagined team buildings corresponded to those typically advertised by PR agencies, with activities meant to increase group cohesion or enhance some productivity related skills. Team buildings though were organized as trips with evening parties. In the first few years it also had an company learning component as presentations were held about firm's work. The last two years the whole focus was retained by *'fun'*, a concept which implied tourist scenery, parties with dancing and good food. After a few years the idea of team building came to be considered routine fun, accepted by the majority as mandatory, without too much defiance. Team building practices comprise and combine action, etiquette and being-on-display while in this way pointing at manifestations of power status-quo and gender relations. The parties themselves witnessed the transformation of some managers into friendly drunkards or flirting pals. Some women managers are judged more severely by their subordinates because of the significant transformation from the managerial rigid and authoritarian style from the office to the fun loving, flirty dancing style adopted at parties and team buildings. The 'masculine' authoritarian females in the firm display masculine features when partying also, as they are in control, provoking and yet maintaining the invisible boundaries of higher status. Moreover, they employ very feminine

charms to remind of some of the beauty traits that brought them power, along with the more common to male and female alike: hard work and ambition.

CONCLUSION: Power and Resistance. Neoliberalizing the Postsocialist Firm

I conclude by showing that resistance to power's exacerbated ills does not bring forth a common effect for the whole company, but mostly disparate manifestations of refusing to be treated in certain ways by some. As common resistant moves are concerned, these occur in mutual sharing of frustration or anxiety and humorous, burlesque expressions of discontentment. Therefore, the status-quo is not challenged in any serious manner, which leads to questions about the democratic and ethical aspects of organizational lives. Following critical management studies' insights I observed the distortions and hindrances the neoliberal managerial ethos entails for the possibility of autonomy of employees who can hardly be 'masters of their own destinies' by their own, individual action or in collaboration with others. Socialist remnants make an appearance in present day's parting ways with socialist well-known deleterious practices; it comes to supersede a whole regime of neoliberal 'normalcy' and produce the neoliberal free entrepreneur of the self. As the enterprising aspect of the transforming subject is easily noticeable, the questions about this subject's autonomy, life opportunities, democratic inclinations and open resistance capacity remain.

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