

# Rise and Fall of the Ideology of Professionalism

An Ethnographic Study of a group of American Information Professionals

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## **ABSTRACT**

The paper examines a group of 12 Information Professionals from a large Insurance company in Southern California caught in the wave of corporate downsizing and processes of outsourcing during the era of Globalization. This particular group of programmers, system analysts and project leaders were able to “survive” outsourcing, kept their jobs, but the interviews found that they are as depressed, unhappy and angry as another group of information professionals interviewed by Richard Sennett who were laid off from the IBM American Office as a result of their jobs being “outsourced” to India. In order to find the reason for the anxieties and social anomie, the author of the paper goes back to reconstruct the lifeworld of the group under study as it was in the year 2000, based on some old interviews. The data from these interviews is analyzed from theoretical perspective derived from the work of authors such as Zizek and Althusser and also Berger, Habermas and Bourdieu. The paper argues that in the earlier stages information professionals were allowed by management to assume some of the status of the old class of independent professionals patterned mainly from the field of law and medicine. The analysis of these interviews shows that they knew that this is a “borrowed” status but they acted like they did not know – they understood how things really are but they continue operating on the premise of an illusion “they are doing it as they did not know” and what is the most important they used this illusion to structure their reality. With the globalization processes and a new labor pool of highly qualified and much cheaper information professionals from India, the skills and knowledge of American programmers were not as valuable assets to corporation as it was, their status undergoes a revision downward, a machine surveillance and method of control used for the other service workers are introduced also for them.. However, the old beliefs die slowly and it is a cause for anomie, conflicts and severe disturbance of social integration.

*... In the meantime, whatever satisfaction alienated men gain from work occurs within the framework of alienation.*

*C. Wright Mills in the White Collar*

## 1 Introduction

When I arrived in 1996 at the Insurance Company X located in Southern California<sup>1</sup> which I will present in this study, I found programmers, programmer analysts, systems analysts and project leaders to be a well established and respected group. Their technical knowledge was considered vital for the success of the corporate objectives, their skills and expertise made computerization and automation possible and defined their distinctive location within the hierarchical structure of the company. The company itself is over 100-years-old, with about 1500 employees and employed 189 information professionals consisting of Programmers, Programmer Analysts, Systems Analysts and Project Leaders. The company was considered generally a desirable place to work, with job security, substantial benefit packages, opportunities for promotions and transfers, and various training programs.

However, in the years of 2003 -2004, the management reformulated the status positioning of the information professionals. These were the years when the first development projects were exported (“outsourced”) <sup>2</sup> to India. Many programmers were

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<sup>1</sup> I was hired by the company in 1996 as a Systems Analyst. In 2000, after I completed my MA degree of Sociology at the Fullerton State University I was promoted to Senior Systems Analyst. I stayed there until the summer of 2008, when I elected an early retirement.

<sup>2</sup> Outsourcing of jobs in the United States in general started in the 70's and 80's with outsourcing of manufacturing jobs, however since 90's with the export of Information Technology jobs more and more people were impacted and while the impact first was concentrated only on the working class now it was

laid off but for those who survived their positions were revised. From highly valued professionals who usually developed the computer systems and had the ownership over them, now that development and most of the “creative” work was being done in India, the remaining programmers were downgraded to support people who had to maintain the programming code after the already developed written systems “came back”. Why these changes? Apparently, with a new labor pool of highly qualified and much cheaper information professionals from India that the globalization processes (Friedman, 2005) and open neo-liberal policies made available to corporations, the skills and knowledge (Kellner, 1989) of programmers were not as valuable assets to corporation as they were before. They were much easier to replace.

As a result, I witnessed a global change in the attitudes and dispositions of the Information professionals. They were constantly angry with the management and the company, dissatisfied and unhappy. According to Mills (1951), unemployment or fear of it, may even make an employee happier, thankful for any job, contented to be at any kind of work when all around there are many workless, worried people. But I did not witness that. Instead, I was surrounded now by a group of very unhappy, unfriendly, depressed and socially withdrawn people.

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spreading to the middle class. The most significant is the impact on the people of middle age who are becoming victims of fast technological change and globalization. Their IT programmer jobs are being exported mainly to India at a very fast pace. John Henry (2008) citing the Gardener Group, a highly respected IT prognosticating firm, estimates that within five years, one half or more of existing programming jobs will leave North America.

*I kept asking myself what is the reason for so much unhappiness and depression?* They still had jobs, still had their old high salaries, while many of their colleagues, to use the jargon, were already “out on the street”. The creative work now was mostly done in India, and their tasks were downgraded to mainly support and maintenance, but these were simpler, more routine tasks. So, from the monetarily “rational” point of view they were rewarded more now than before, because they were paid the same as before, but now for simpler, more routinized and less demanding work.

To explain their unhappiness and also mine, because I was very much one of the unhappy and depressed ones, I turned towards sociological theory. I saw good possibilities in Berger (1966) with his theory of lifeworld and stock of knowledge and I searched for clues there. Perhaps, the information professionals did not have enough resources in their stock of knowledge to deal with changes? I found some help in Habermas (1991), his theory of communicative action. Perhaps, the disturbance of communication between management and information workers caused the problem? Another important theory was Ann Swidler’s (1986). In her article *Culture in action: Symbols and Strategies* she defines culture as a toolkit of symbols, stories, rituals and world-views which people use in various configurations to solve different kinds of problems. Swidler (1986) separates “settled culture” which is when people know how to act and they have to refine and reinforce skills, habits, modes of experience and create continuities in style of ethos versus “unsettled culture” when structures have to be built or rebuilt all together. According to her, in unsettled periods, is when actors look for cultural resources. Unsettled times teach new modes and new strategies of action but their long-term influence depend on structural opportunities for survival of competing ideologies.

She brings back into picture the time horizon needed for the changes. To apply her theory to my example, the time before the changes would correspond to the ‘settled culture’ and the time after as the “unsettled culture” and by analyzing the values, the habits of before and after I would possibly find the answer to my question. In addition to separation of “settled and unsettled” time and “tool kit”, her theory was important to me because it provided me with an understanding of the importance of time, the importance of a historical perspective (Sewell, 1996) in structural change.

I realized I have to go back and truly investigate the genealogy of the lifeworld of information professionals, the values, habits, modes of experiences, their mode of consciousness (Schutz, 1970). For that I went back and “unpacked” 10 old interviews that I conducted in 2000 with Programmers, Systems Analysts and Project Leaders with whom I worked with at this Insurance Company. These interviews were never scripted until the spring of 2009 and I am offering the results here. The analysis of these interviews is presented in Chapter 3 of this paper.

These interviews helped me rebuilt the genealogy of the lifeworld of information professionals. In the process I discover a theory which I found the most helpful in the search of answer for my question and this is Zizek’s (1994)<sup>3</sup> post-modern theory on ideology. The classic definition of ideology is a false consciousness (Marx,1967). However, in the post-modern social theory, philosophers as Zizek (1994) question this notion and take in consideration the positive aspects of ideology. The information

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<sup>3</sup> Zizek also often cites Jacques Lacan (1979) from *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* and Louis Althusser (1984) from *Essays on Ideology*..



professionals are employee of the corporation. They were somewhat privileged in the hierarchy of the company and allowed some independence because of their skills and application of knowledge, however their independence is delimited by the framework of corporation and the management defines their tasks and priorities. Therefore, for them believing that they are true professionals is an illusion. Yet, they use this illusion to structure their reality (Zizek, 1994). They operate based on a lifeworld that includes beliefs and values of culture of professionalism. At the same time, they understand how things really are but they continue operating on the premise of this illusion “they are doing it as they did not know” (Zizek,1994). The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring the real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what Zizek (1994) calls ideological fantasy. The fundamental level of ideology, he explains, however, is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an unconscious fantasy structuring the social reality itself.

The information workers of the company were allowed to “borrow” (Mills, 1951) somewhat a special status from the old professional middle class regarding their independence. Also, they were “left” to believe that they were more than technicians and were closer to the creative elite class that developed during the 70’s and the 80’s (Bell, 1973) with the rise of the post-industrial society and the importance of the application of knowledge. However, their special status was actually tolerated only for as long as the management permitted it and as we will see the changes started from the top. Chapter 4 is based on Participant Observations that I have from years of 2003 to 2004 at the same Insurance Company and it is a recording of the processes that occurs as a prelude of the

labor and project outsourcing to India. Chapter 4 is actually a story of an installation of a machine (a badge reader machine). The functions and way this machine intruded into the life of information professionals demonstrated to the information professional staff that old “rules of the game “ (Burawoy, 1979) were not valid any more.

Chapter 5 is based on Participant Observations at the same Insurance company from years 2005 to 2008 and informal interviews with information professionals from the same company that I conducted in April of 2009. This chapter outlines a sad story of unhappiness and rise of social anomie. It describes the story of downward mobility of the information workers from a well respected group with a special status to a group that has close resemblance to the position of other service workers in the company. It also gives the answer of my research question to why the relative job satisfaction and stable way of reproduction of social peace between information workers and management was replaced by anomie, rise or conflicts and deep unhappiness that borders psychological disturbances and depressions.

My Conclusion summarizes my findings. It also tries to place the study into a larger societal picture of a general downward mobility of the middle class in the United States. The Conclusion also discusses the limitation of the study.

## **2 Chapter 2**

### **2.1 *The Study***

As I discussed in the introduction, my study consists of three parts: the first one was conducted in 2000 and presents 10 semi-structured interviews; the second is based on my participant observations and discusses the events of 2003 – 2004 years and the last part is based on my participant observations, some of them recorded, but mostly from the memory of years between 2004 and 2008. The last part also includes 12 informal interviews with information professionals that I conducted in April of 2009.

### **2.2 *Methods***

My study was conducted using two methods – direct-participant observation and interviews.

#### **2.2.1 Direct-Participant Method**

The method of participant observation can be traced to the early ethnographic studies that distinguished between objective observers who, primary through the use of interviewing, approach the culture from the outside, and participant observers who use observation to research a culture from within (Creswell, 1997). I saw it as a method for eliciting from people their definitions of reality, and the manner in which they organize their world. According to Creswell (1997), the ultimate aim of participant observation is to “generate practical and theoretical truths about human life grounded in the realities of

daily existence.” A prolonged engagement at a site provided me opportunities to test my own biases and perceptions, as well as those of my respondents and were all very important factors of a successful direct-participant observation. I used direct-participation method, because I needed time to check my own developing perceptions. Persistent observations were important for me in order to identify pervasive quality as well as atypical characteristics (Guba, 1981).

At the same time my position was considered one of uninvolvement. According to Schutz, uninvolvement as detachment has a specific sociological relevance. The detachment is characteristic of “the stranger” who, as observer, is able to offer an “objective” view of the host community (Schutz, 1970). My objectivity claim is based on two facts: I am an immigrant from Eastern European Origin who lives in the United States therefore I am a stranger to the community in Simmel’s (1950) sense. My second claim to objectivity is that my professional training is not in Computers sciences. I am an Economist and Sociologist by education who became a Systems Analyst and as such I never fully identified with information professionals. This gave me a special position of “nearness and distance” that is the peculiar position of a stranger (Simmel, 1950).

### **2.2.2 The Semi-Structured Interviews conducted in 2000**

My semi-structured interviews that I conducted in 2000 were developed to capture the structure of the lifeworld of information professionals by Habermas (1991). See Appendix A for the interview questions.

- To something in the objective world (as the totalities of entities about which true statements are possible). In my case study, this is the awareness of existence of corporation with all the rules and regulations.
- To something in the social world (as the totality of legitimated regulated interpersonal relations). In my case study, this is the relationships between the management and information workers.
- To something in the subjective world (as the totality of experiences to which the speaker has privileged access and which he can express in public). In my case this is the technocratic authority of information professionals as a mode of consciousness that was being objectivated through special training, high salaries, position of status and professional prestige, awareness of special contributions to the roles and objectives of the company, special prizes for successfully implementation of projects and etc.

### **2.2.3 The Informal Interviews conducted in April 2009**

The interviews that I conducted in April 2009 were directed specifically to find out how information professionals are coping with the current situation. I was not allowed to

visit the company building<sup>4</sup>, only the employees and visitors with special permission could do so, but I went out with several groups of my old co-workers who agreed to meet me for lunch or dinner and I recorded some of the discussions, the analysis of which I present in Chapter 4.

## ***2.3 Method of Analysis***

While I explain my data mainly based on Zizek's (1994) and Althusser (1984: 32) theories that give a special primacy of ideology of a system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group, I use many operational ideas from several groups of modern social theorists of "every day and system" as Latour & Callon (1992); post-structural theories of Bourdieu (1977), Berger and Luckmann (1966), Habermas (1991) and also some older theories classified as conflict theories of Dahrendorf (1959). These theories helped me understand and explain how ideology as a system of ideas and representations works in everyday life, how it gets actualized through communication and how it can be studied as a process which becomes "real" through the interactions and the intersubjectivity of actors.

Very useful ideas for my analysis I found in Latour & Callon (1992) and in their explanation of a difference between "system and every day" that they compare to actors of different sizes – Macro and Micro actors. The state, corporations and other institutions are the macro actors and possess many more strategies and resources. They enlist "bodies, materials, discourses, techniques, laws and organizations" and manage by

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<sup>4</sup> As I mentioned I early retired from this company in 2008

establishing set of rules that no longer need to be considered and that are put in “black boxes”. By using laws, contracts, authors refer to as “durable materials” and “walls”, the macro actors stabilize the environment in which the micro actors function. Micro actors are people with their interactions, culture, individual roles. The people interactions are much richer and more complicated than the rules of the macro actors (Latour & Callon, 1992). These authors believe in the power and creativity of micro actors which in their everyday life adapt to the system and create their own environment.

The post-structuralist ideas of Bourdieu (1977), Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Habermas (1991) became guiding principles in my analysis, and especially the ideas of “no separation” between structure and action, structure is action, structure is acted in order to exist and the freedom and constraint are imbedded in the structure itself. In this type of analysis, constructivist approach assures reflexivity and it is embodied in particular institutions and their genesis and transformation. Also the structure and culture are much more cognitive. Structures are being actualized in mutual understanding through communication and are very much process oriented. What makes them real is that through the interactions and the intersubjectivity of actors the structures were being realized as such.

Also important for my analysis is the current of research that began with Dahrendorf's (1959) notion of classes as micro-conflict groups within imperatively coordinated associations. These may be seen as associations of people controlled by a hierarchy of authority positions. Different social positions influence the extent of power of different groups (Foucault, 1980) and constitute the central mechanism by which

various sorts of resources are appropriated and distributed, therefore determining the underlying capacities for action of various social actors (Giddens, 1973). Phenomena are to be studied as direct and immediate relationships in which situationally located actors exercise their action orientations as interest-groups (Dahrendorf, 1959; Bourdieu, 1985) or conflict-groups (Dahrendorf, 1959; Wright, 1997), and reveal their intentions through real and effective interactional and communicative practices (Foucault, 1980).

As I explain in the introduction I refer in my analysis quite often to Swidler (1986) and her separation of “settled and unsettled culture” “tool kit” and importance of time. However, I use her theory with a deviation. In her definition of “settled cultures” she includes mainly traditions and common sense, while ideology as a system of ideas and representation (Althusser, 1984) is not explicitly mentioned. She places a special importance on ideology only during “unsettled” lives and argues that this is when people create new strategies of action, but long-term influence depends on structural opportunities for survival of competing ideologies. While my study shows that in “unsettled lives” information workers reach out in search for new ideologies to re-build their shaken lifeworld, during “settled time” ideology is as important. During the “settled lives” a pre-dominant ideology can help to refine and reinforce skills, habits, modes of experience.



### 3 Chapter 3

#### 3.1 *Genealogy of the “Lifeworld” of the information professionals*

To understand how the information workers developed to be known as a group with a special status, I will present an overview of some literature that started with writing of Daniel Bell (1973). This literature review will help us understand how lifeworld and the stock of knowledge of the information specialists under investigation was shaped (Berger, 1966; Habermas, 1991). The professionalism claim of knowledge workers attached to big corporations is closely connected with the writings of Daniel Bell (1973) who bases his prognostications mainly on technology advancement and the role of knowledge in the production process. Using demographic statistics of the percentage of the American workforce engaged in information work, he suggested that a shift was occurring from a goods-producing society to information or knowledge society. Bell was also the first to point out to the significant growth of the number of "knowledge workers" and to assign to them a role of central importance in the post-industrial society. He argued that the industrial era was over and that a new social order was emerging in which knowledge and information will replace industrial commodity production as the "axial principle" of social organization (Bell, 1973). Thus, the information professionals, as products of this new era, will emerge as a new “privileged” occupational group with a role of central importance in the post-industrial society.

The Derber & Schwartz’s (1991) study, *New Mandarins or New Proletariat? Professional Power at Work* is based on a sample of a large range of professionals of

American corporations, government bureaucracies, universities, and professional practices. In their analysis, the authors take on Bell's position that the professionals have become a class with new powers, but at the same time elucidates their clear "subordination" to higher management and to capitalism's legal framework. The professionals are depicted as "contractors of the late capitalism." Derber and Schwartz (1991) argued that professionals have created "logocratic" – or knowledge-based – hierarchies that intermesh with the formal capitalist command system that invest professionals with substantial, although limited authority (Derber and Schwartz, 1991).

Lynne Zucker (1977), in her article *The Role of Institutionalization in cultural persistence* discusses that the connection between "professionalism" of computerized work and expertise are so taken-for-granted or "exteriorized" as objective truth that they virtually constitute "objective facts" of organizational existence. Since administrative employees saw professionalism as representing expertise and advancement, and computers were seen as modern expert technologies, the two became quickly identified with each other.

Prasad and Prasad (1994) in their article *The Ideology of Professionalism and Work Computerization of Professionalism* demonstrate how the ideology of professionalism facilitated a climate of acceptance toward computers, escalated commitment to the technology and was partly responsible for the suppression of individual concerns regarding work computerization.

The new culture of professionalism is depicted by Sherry Turkle (1980) in *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, an ethnographic investigation of the

relationships that people form with computers. This study had found that computers evoke strong feelings, carry personal meaning, and create a rich expressive environment. The elusiveness of computational process made the computer an exemplary “constructed object”, a cultural object which different people and groups of people apprehended with very different descriptions and invested with very different attributes.

While the studies above demonstrate how the information workers developed to be known as a group with a special status based mainly on the technology advancement and the role of knowledge in the production process, the next few studies take in consideration their actual position in the labor process and the relations of production.

When Mills (1951) wrote his *White Collar*, information professionals did not exist yet, because their rise was firmly connected with the commercial use of the computer. Nevertheless his book is very important for our subject because for the first time in the sociological literature, it describes the growing middle class as a new cast of actors. According to Mills (1951), this did upset the nineteenth century expectation that society will be divided between entrepreneurs and wage workers. At the same time what is significant writes Mills is that for the new middle class, “the independent property is out of range and they are employees on salary and as such labor market, not control of property determines their chances to receive income, exercise power, enjoy prestige, learn and use skills”. Therefore, although they have somewhat a privileged position, their role is limited. Mills points out that they will be considered professionals, but this will **not** be a genuine status, but a “borrowed” one from the old professionals. The old middle class although not owning property had a high degree of independence in day-to-day

decisions, in setting their fees or other remuneration, in regulating their own hours and conditions of work according to market conditions and personal inclinations. Thus, if the new middle class were to consider themselves professionals that would be in name only, because the main criteria - autonomy of decision would be missing. This is being elicited also by Harold Wilenski (1964) whose article “*The Professionalization of Everyone?*” uses the notion professionalism and without calling it an ideology points out that the name is losing its original meaning and it is becoming much too widely used by everybody with some technical skills. He argues that this concept is being “patterned” (very close to Mills concept of “borrowed”) mainly after the historical trio of medicine, law and clergy and this model is delimited by three basis criteria: 1) command of an esoteric body of knowledge acquired through academic training; 2) service orientation; and 3) autonomy of work performance with power over client. Wilenski (1964) is optimistic that the new professionalism will be able to satisfy the first and the second condition, but he has doubts regarding the third one.

Similar doubts expresses Erik Wright (1987) in his article *The Transformation of the American Class Structure, 1960-1980* takes a stand on this question and clarifies that the status of the new professionals is contradictory – they are professionals but at the same time employees of the corporation and as such exposed to different maneuvers, tactics, and techniques that management uses to harness their skills and knowledge for efficient use and maximum benefit to the corporation, and whenever necessary, for neutralization of their independence and political potential.

### ***3.2 The Reformed work place***

Another important component of the information professional's lifeworld is their expectation of more flexible work place, relaxed hierarchy and ability to manage projects by dividing them to tasks and self-managing the tasks. Next, I will present some literature that discusses the evolution of these ideas.

The projection of a reformed work place started with Bell's predictions and continued to have a strong support among other liberal theorists and futurists of the 1960's and 1970's who projected an organizational revolution in the last quarter of the 20th century (Drucker, 1968; Berkeley, 1971). It was supposed that the critical role of knowledge work in this new style enterprise would necessitate the restructuring of administrative systems. Dissatisfied with the clear pattern of management domination and hoping to obviate the necessity for remedial social, political or economic action, certain writers anticipated the emergence of a new style of corporate organization. These writers emphasized that increasing management reliance on the application of knowledge to the problems of production would transform and, indeed, democratize corporate organization. In their scenario information specialists, whose knowledge was essential for the new information economy, were assigned the role of forerunners of a huge organizational change. They were seen as the vanguard of a social movement that would suffuse through the social order, reconstituting organizational power structures and fundamentally altering the workplace (Bell, 1979; Drucker, 1968; Zuboff, 1988).

Based on their functional contribution and privileged position, their potential for power, the information specialists were conceptualized as the occupational grouping that would pose the most serious challenge to managerial-based authority (Zuboff, 1988). The "technocratic authority" of computer specialists was defined to be an authority of "the task", rather than "the rank" (Drucker, 1968). According to Drucker (1988), "knowledge workers" will be guided by the objective imperatives of their skills and will require a performance-oriented organization rather than an authority-oriented organization. In this projection of the future the information specialists will slowly merge into the authority structure without necessarily becoming occupants of hierarchical authority positions, while those in hierarchical positions will find that their authority is increasingly limited (Berkeley, 1971). Thus, the hierarchy becomes a question of culture: the social structure must be entrenched in the common frames of references and shared meanings "behind" visible behavior and interaction patterns. The constant-learning work environment of information specialists consistently will generate innovative methods of information sharing and new organizational patterns of relations with management that are both dynamic and more intricate than earlier patterns (Zuboff, 1988).

The shape and quality of relationships will vary in relation to what people know, what they feel, and what the task at hand requires. Relationships will need to be fashioned and refashioned as part of the dynamism of the social processes, like inquiry and dialogue, that mediate learning. Such relationships are more intricate because their character derives from the specifics of the situation that are always both pragmatic – what it takes to get the work done best – and psychological – what people need to sustain motivation and commitment.

Zuboff refers to the future relationships of power as a "network of mutual dependencies", constantly in tension, with an open structure of shifting priorities and strategy positions. In essence, Zuboff (1988) operationalizes some of Michel Foucault's (1974) post-modern ideas on power to the specific organizational environment.

To these new patterns of independence of the work place, Michael Burawoy (1979) in his book *Manufacturing Consent* refers to as “the rules of the game”. Playing the game creates consent among the workers about the rules on which the game is based and more generally, about the system of social relations (owner-manager-worker) that defines the rules of the game. Because, managers and workers are both involved in the game, the system of antagonistic social relations to which the game was supposed to respond is obscured. If we translate this logic to our study, before the processes of outsourcing, corporation strategies were to enlist to the maximum the creative potentials of information workers. Information workers committed to projects and accepted the ideology of empowerment as their own. Thus, this game enlisted the cooperation of both sides and at the same time obscured the antagonistic social relationships

### ***3.3 The importance of the ideology of professionalism***

In the year 2000, when the interviews were conducted, programmers, programmer analysts, systems analysts and project leaders were a well established and respected group. Their technical knowledge was considered vital for the success of the corporate objectives. Their knowledge during critical system problems especially during system abends (system malfunctions) and their ability to quickly resolve problems, sometimes in the middle of the night in conditions of high stress and pressure was invaluable. In the insurance company under investigation, information specialists’ skills and expertise made computerization and automation possible and defined their distinctive location within the hierarchical structure of the company. The knowledge they possessed was critical to the

success of the enterprise. Their basic duties included activities that were central to the corporate mission, such as developing computer systems that support the most strategic functions of the company: claims and insurance operations. Insofar as their skills were essential, irreplaceable, and obscure, information specialists claimed and were granted higher ranking than comparable workers. At that time, the participant observations showed that the technical professionals accepted power of the corporation as a positive and productive (Lewin, 2000). They were able to internalize it and view it as a set of practices through which they represented their own presence at the corporation (Abbot, 1988; Alvesson, 1996; Willmoth, 1994; Fischer & Dirsmith, 1995).

A programmer appropriated the corporate “language” using “we” to represent the company and his own presence in it.

When the company had to close the division, we had only six weeks to do it. In that short time I had to change all the programs. My professionalism dictated for me what to do. I felt I am entrusted with the task. I felt really empowered, I felt that I am responsible for a piece of the business.

In another interview, a project leader accepts the corporate goals of efficiency and rationality as her own:

To me having a good team means is to have a team that operates like a smooth running machine. We get an assignment, develop a schedule, deliver on time, work without conflicts. And this is what I mean by having fun. Let’s say we have a tight schedule, and I can say to “my” people – if we work very hard next two weeks, work together as a team and deliver on time, we will have a pizza party.

How about the “night calls”? Don’t you dislike them?:

Don’t get me wrong, it is not that I liked supporting the “night calls”, but I like that my bank works 24 hours and I know that programmers at that bank I also on call 24 hours. And sometimes, at night you are alone with computer operators, for example, that are there for you to support you when you are called. So, it is a binding experience too. And in the next morning you are like a martyr – “hey” Stephen did you get this night call?”; “Yep, I did...They got me...” Also, in the middle of the night, you are responsible for all the decisions, no approval needed. You are equal to any manager or vice president; you are alone responsible for all the decisions.



The interviewee mixes the rational goals of corporation , a business that operates as a “smooth running machine”, with more traditional values as a community building, “binding experience”, “having fun”, having a “pizza party”. This is very much in support of Latour & Callon (1992) who believe in power and creativity of micro actors who in their everyday lives adapt to the system and create their own environment.

And then there is a hidden desire to be equal to any manager or vice-president. Zizek (1994) argues that “beliefs can regulates social reality”. Here in our example the interviewed beliefs in the ideology of professionalism expressing it as “I feel empowered”, “I feel owning part of the business”, “my professionalism dictated” is something what according to Zizek (1994) citing Althusser defines as a process of “ideological interpellation” through which the symbolic machine of ideology is internalized into the ideological experience of Meaning and Truth.

These empowering desires were very important for the subjects whom are interviewed, most of them from working class background, and for whom becoming computer programmers was truly seen as social mobility. Here is an example:

Growing up as a bubbly blond, now it is nice to say that I am a computer programmer. Also, growing up in a family where the women were powerless, I wanted to be different – to have a career, financial freedom, ability to control my life.

At the same time Zizek (1994) explains that:

But we can learn from Pascal this internalization by structural necessity, never fully succeeds, that there is always a **residue, a leftover, a strain of traumatic irrationality** [underlining mine] and senselessness sticking to it, and this leftover, far from hindering the full submission of the subject to the ideological command is the very condition of it, which we call enjoyment-in-sense (enjoyment), proper to ideology.

This is precisely what I am seeing in my interviews. People are committed to the goals of the company, expressing it at their own, but at the same time there is leftover of not fully submitted to it, individualizing it with more traditional beliefs of having fun together, having a pizza party and so on which is in support of the “enjoyment-in-sense (enjoy-meant), proper to ideology internalization. Zizek (1994) refers to it as ideology in practice or “practiced ideology”.

An interviewed Data Base Analyst spoke for his love for the profession. On the question whether he identified with the profession he responded confidently “yes”:

I love to be a Data Base Analyst. It was a profession, but a profession that “found me”, I have a degree in Math and liked resolving problems and finding solutions and the programming was for me the best fit.

Another interviewed programmer:

Solving problems and finding solutions and the challenge of building new system provided me with creativity and satisfaction that no other job would ever provide him.

A system programmer:

I am responsible for 9 data bases. I am on call 24 hours. I do not carry a beeper, but do not tell this my supervisor [laugh], I am always around, they call me directly when they need me. I liked helping application team, helped them accomplished their team goals. I liked to be needed, well liked and accepted.

A project leader who was promoted working for number of years as programmer explains what she likes about the profession of computer programming as follows:

Also, what I like about computer programming is that you work with “smart people”. Most of the programmers are smart. Of course, there are a few “bozos” that got in this profession somehow but most of them are smart people.

All these examples point to how information professionals internalized the ideology of professionalism as their own, by making it an expression of their self-identity, and confirmation of the self-disciplining sense of their own normality as sovereign subjects

(Willmott, 1994). Women seem to derive a particular symbolic benefit from these positions.

Another element of ideology as explained by Zizek (1994) is drawn towards the unconscious, repressed and it is kind of 'short circuit' between it (the ideology) and another desire which is already repressed, located in the unconscious, a desire which can be characterize as the "latent dream-thought". The "latent dream-thought" of the subjects that were interviewed is a desire for a real independence and real power. The interviews demonstrated that although they used their "technocratic authority," as "symbolic power" (Bourdieu, 1992) to reaffirm and furthered their position in corporation, there was always a strong awareness of their dependent and subordinate position.

The dream is reflected by several of the responses I received. On the question, what made her feel the most empowered, a programmer gave the following answer:

Few years ago because of an illness of one of my kids, I needed to work part time for a month. The management had to allow me to do that. I felt like I am the power broker, call "my shots", because of my system knowledge I could not be replaced, I had that leverage, holding "all the balls", which truly gave me the sense of power. They could not refuse me. I was in control of the situation, because of my knowledge of the system.

And a systems programmer who had to travel to Chicago quite often because the main frame (the big machine) resided there confessed:

I am the one who can decide and I am the one who picks up the week when I travel to Chicago. If I want I can always find a "valid reason" to go. The manager does not have any clue of my work, so they are willing to approve anything that I ask for.

These quotes make it apparent that individuals understand that they are employees and the management is in charge, but they enjoy this ideology "know and enjoy" which Zizek (1994) calls "ideological fantasy" and "enjoyment-in-sense (enjoy-meant).

Another component of ideology as described by Zizek (1994) is its ability not only to structure “effective, real social relations”, but also to mask some insupportable, real, impossible root antagonisms which he characterizes as traumatic social divisions that cannot be symbolized. My interviews have strong support for these ideas, the programmers expressed the resentment and there was a notion of hidden conflicts between them and the management.

On a question of “What did you dislike about your job?” the answer from a programmer was:

There are too many bureaucratic methodologies to follow. Sometimes you develop a sense of ownership to the system and when you are told how to change it because of some political decisions, without your involvement, it is awful, it is like being a painter who had being told what to put on his painting. Political decisions like this are awful and never worked.

And another programmer:

People are not included in communication when some new methodologies are decided and the management and they are forced on them, so programmers feel that they are just grant people, that they are “slaves” to high up. It is bad enough when documentation forms are forced upon them, but is even worst they are told how precisely they should code. This takes out a lot of their creativity.

On a different occasion, a project leader complains of what she hates the most:

That sometimes I had to accept decisions from the management that were not right and to pretend that I liked them and to defend them in front of my team

Another occasion – the company made a decision that all the discounts for personal computers can be given only if we use a particular vendor of the company. However, people found that if these discounts were use with vendors that are just next door the price would be so much more reasonable. You see the bureaucracy here how it works against the people and I was the one who had to refuse them. It was an awful experience.

All these interviews described how actors used their stock of knowledge, their “tool kit” of values and ideas which included the ideology of professionalism as a specific system of ideas and representations (Althusser, 1984) to develop their subjective

orientations and structure their reality, live their everyday life as “settled culture” (Swidler, 1986) and be productive. The next chapter will argue that without this very specific ideology, the lifeworld and available cultural resources of the information workers were placed under serious stress. The mechanisms, by which the system of collaboration between management and information workers was used to be able to reproduce itself, were also disturbed.

## 4 Chapter 4

### *4.1 Globalization and processes of re-bureaucratization*

In theory the new market forces of globalization and open markets should have caused a more fluid organizations, decreased hierarchy and a more flexible work structure, often refer in the literature as “post-bureaucratic” organization (Styhre, 2007). However, in a chapter called “The post-bureaucratic organization: the Skeptic’s view”, Styhre (2007) explains that claims made about post-bureaucracy are “not matched by a similar depth or scope of empirical support”, the “discussion is speculative and insufficiently specific” and that the construct of “the post-bureaucratic organization” is riddled with ambiguities. According to her, we find substantial evidence for re-bureaucratization and little or nothing to support the belief that events are “flowing with an epochlist tide”. She believes that in the globalization era many companies adopt a “post-bureaucratic rhetoric” while at the same time they introduce processes whose intent is top-down control rather than bottom-up facilitation. Styhle (2007) also discusses that in

the face of uncertainty and ambiguities (in our example processes of outsourcing and globalization) managers resort to what is well-known and familiar, namely managerial practices that are firmly established as legitimate practices within the company, industry or profession. This is very much in support of an early study by Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Power (1983) “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields” later on re-published in a book *The New Institutionalism in organizational analysis* edited by W. Powell and Paul DiMaggio (1991) who argue that in environments charged with symbolic uncertainty, organizations may model themselves on other organizations and that the context of institutional isomorphism is a useful tool for understanding the politics and ceremony that pervade much modern organizational life.

To find justifications of these processes of re-bureaucratization in the mist of open markets and free flow of global capital, I would like to note some earlier ideas of few Marxist writers like Kellner (1989 ) and Wright (1987) who remind us that post-capitalist classes are rooted in control over two critical kinds of production resources – organizational assets and skill assets (or perhaps more narrowly, knowledge assets) – both of which become increasingly salient as the forces of production develop. The logic of capitalist development, therefore, generates a trajectory of technical changes that expand the material basis of capitalist class.

Also, I would like to mention that according to many social analysts of globalization, the institutional changes go hand in hand with the revised role of the capitalist state. The proponents of the increased role of the state (Panitch, 1996; Jessop,

2008) argue that the capitalist globalization takes place “in through and under the aegis of states”, the process Panitch calls “new constitutionalism for disciplinary neo-liberalism”.

The neo-liberal project (Chorev, 2005) starts at a lower level and that constitutes the higher level, and subsumes all relationships (Jessop, 2008) by coming to the surface through lower level components of the social structure. It is clear that there is a structural transformation which has a sequence of events: enforcing discipline, increasing control, improving efficiency, removing people who were not efficient enough, preparing the ground so the cheaper and more efficient labor force can be brought in. Therefore, it can be argued that capitalism is coming back, mobilizing itself, reinforcing his old locus of accumulation as a clear goal of the system (Comaroff, 2001). In the neo-liberal agenda there is a vision of revised system instrumentalism reflected into changed structure of institutions as the state reinvents itself (Sassen, 1996). Institutional changes are not a mere outcome of globalization, but one facilitator of it. Such a strategy justifies the view of globalization as a “project” of establishing new institutional arrangements (Chorev, 2005).

## ***4.2 The Institutional Re-bureaucratization***

The processes of re- bureaucratization, increased control and new technology to monitor work processes were installed in the company under study in 2003-2004. This did not contradict the processes of globalization, but in support of the ideas presented in the previous subchapter, preceded and facilitated it, in our case facilitated IT labor and project outsourcing to India. The flexible work place (Zuboff, 1988), the flattening of the work hierarchy which was supposed to be the an authority of "the task", and "not the

rank" (Drucker, 1968) all these practices which were the banners of the corporate cultures now were severely altered and replaced with the old style practices of command and control. The difference was that the old style practices of command and control were reintroduced this time with more modern technology in our case a Badge Machine, a machine that was installed to induce and assure the "automatic functioning of power" known from Foucault's (1974) writings as "panoptical surveillance".

In the late 2003, a badge reader machine (we will call it the Badge Reader) was installed next to the security guard. Instead of showing their badge to the security guard every time an employee entered the building the badge would have to be read by the reader. If the badge for some reason was invalid, the machine would start beeping and the security guard would get involved, otherwise the employee could enter the building. In addition to checking the validity of the badge, the machine would record the time an employee enters and leaves the building. However, it was officially announced that the machine was installed for security reasons *only* and not for validating the time. In other words while the machine was able to produce reports regarding time of entering and exiting the building, they would not be delivered to the management.

But a shift in tone soon occur in the following months. On a department meeting that occurred in the spring of 2004 however, the new vice-president announced that new methods of work would be used and the Badge Reader would be used to monitor programmers' time. And this was how everything was going to work. First, a software program for Project Management was installed and managers and project leaders were given authority to use it. Every project had to be sub-divided by tasks and every task



described and accounted in the Project Management package. Programmers and programmer analysts were assigned to different tasks and their time to be spent had to be projected and recorded. Then another software program was installed on each programmer's PC and at the end of the week, by Friday and no later than Monday morning, programmers had to report the time they worked on allocated to given tasks. The total time had to be at least 40 hours and these 40 hours would have to coincide with the time that was shown on the Management report produced by the Badge Reader which showed that the amount of time people were in the building.

In case the time reported by programmers and the time shown on the management report produced by the Badge Machine did not coincide, the Manager would have to meet programmers and discuss the reason for the difference. The implication was serious: for not recording and reporting correctly, a warning letter to Human Resources could be written, the evaluation review could be impacted, and then ultimately a programmer could be dismissed for non-performance.

The general attitude was shock: the freedom to be responsible for projects, allocate their own tasks and self-monitor them was replaced with much stricter controls. Also, the freedom to come and go during the day, stay late, come early, be away for long time during the day was all taken away. Therefore, from now on programmers who were so used to being treated as and always thought of themselves as professionals were going to be monitored as the rest of other service workers, they felt that they were reduced to clerks. This finding coincides with Sennett's (1998) who interviewed IBM programmers

who were in the process of being outsourced and also expressed outrage that were being treated as clerks.

Then in three more months later, another “Town Hall Meeting” was held to bring a “new surprise”. Programmers were expected to pay for and acquire their own training outside of working hours. The company would not provide or pay any more for in-house training or training during working hours. For programmers whose professional life depends on constant upgrading and renewing their skills with the new technology and who considered the ability to be trained as a given privilege, this new line to reveal to information professionals that the company “does not care anymore about us”.

To better clarify the situation I will describe how professionals’ positions of different levels changed.

Programmers – their position radically changed. They would no longer be assigned to develop software that was all going to be done in India. Their role would be to support whatever the Indian programmers needed: computer support, describing to them the existing programs, setting technical environment, fixing computer bugs after the Indian programmers returned the programs back. Their freedom to divide the total time to tasks and self-manage the tasks was taken away. The freedom that programmers and systems analysts had to be able to leave during the day for personal tasks without special notifications and then coming back, staying at work outside regular working hours, coming on the weekend and so on, without very much strict management control, was strictly taken away from them.

Managers – good managers who climbed up the social ladder from the ranks of programmers to systems analysts to managers were laid off or early retired. An older style manager, Ann, after several forceful attempts to resist the new system, selected early retirement. According to her, she could not “accept the new situation when her people were being treated as slaves”. “New type” managers such as Debbie (see attached e-mail, Appendix B) were brought in. Debbie was from Texas, held a degree in Accounting from Texas University and an MBA from a small local school. She did not know anything about Computer profession, used to be a Manager over 200 Accounting clerks in a big firm. She enjoyed the monitoring. Employees collectively believed that she was brought in by the upper management precisely because she did not have any attachment to the programming profession to monitor the productivity and efficiency of different people on a purely technical (bureaucratic) basis, so that the layoffs could be easier justified.

The position of systems analysts as it was known so far disappeared. Their old independence, ability to lead, set schedules, estimate, communicate with programmers and business, test and integrate software was taken away. All this creative work was now done in India. As you can see from the attached e-mail (Appendix B), their job became devaluated to very simple tasks of prioritizing some “program bugs” of programs that were developed already. They used to be part of the programming and development teams, now they were placed in a separate group. The newly hired, now called by the new name – of “Business Analyst” were mostly native English speakers with MBA degrees. To summarize, the old position of a Systems Analyst as I knew it disappeared.

## 5 Chapter 5

### 5.1 *Falling from grace*

It is quite amazing that there are so few ethnographic studies that deal with such an important topic as outsourcing of labor considering how many people in the United States were affected, first by the export of the blue collar jobs, subsequently by export of the service workers jobs and then by the export of engineering and programming jobs. One of these very few studies is Katherine Newman's (1988) - *Falling from Grace. The experience of downward mobility in the American Middle Class* in which she gives analysis of the downward mobility experience based upon 150 in-depth interviews. Many of her interviews are with executives and managers who lost their jobs during corporate restructuring and downsizing. They usually suffer the indignities of financial loss in isolation experiencing it as "*falling from grace*". Being victims of their beliefs in meritocratic individualism; beliefs that rewards flow to those who are "really deserving" and that people are masters of their own destinies, the downsized executives and managers usually end up blaming themselves, experiencing the downward mobility as a personal failure.

Some of her other interviews were interviews with blue-collar workers, whose downward mobility takes on a communal character. The workers she interviewed were laid off or were still working at the Singer Sewing Machine Company in Elizabeth, upstate New York, but the plant was going through the major restructuring. The most useful for our study is the experience of workers who were still employed. What is common with our study is that some of these workers were highly skilled at one time, but

their craftsmanship was devaluated by an installation of a standard system machine. According to those workers, the new “standard machine” was the death knell for the craft ethic. Newman (1988) found out that the social relations in the plant underwent a fundamental change for the worse as a result of the new “incentive” system. Skilled workers could not afford to be helpful to each other:

The whole atmosphere was different. “Before” there was times where they would let you go, maybe get something in a different department, help out. But when the standards system come in, whatever job you were on, you were stuck on that job. You just lost contact with the people in the place.

The emphasis on productivity went hand in hand with the erosion of quality:

When I started there, everything was quality. And it had to be done right and if it wasn’t done right, you got it back to it. When the standard system came in, they tell you to check one out of every....ten pieces or one out of every....thirty pieces, so you didn’t care about the other twenty-nine pieces. And if those twenty-nine pieces turned out to be scrap, [the company wound up with scrap].

The highly skilled workers, they called themselves “old-timers” saw the standards system not as a spur to productivity, but as an act of betrayal, a sign of distrust, and a wedge that drove the management and workers apart. This sounds so much to parallel my study which makes me believe that there is a close connection between the ideology of professionalism which I am trying to describe and the ideology of craftsmanship that these skill workers at the Singer factory exhibit.

Another study that is useful for my work is Sennett’s *Corrosion of Character* (1998). Sennett’s interviews of programmers downsized from IBM American Office are part of a more global study on how the globalization processes threaten the ability of people to form their characters into sustained narratives and how the vigorous capitalism, where the “no long term” disorients action over long term, loosens bonds of trust and

commitment and divorces will from behavior. He finds our time a time which “arrow is broken” it has no trajectory in a continually reengineering, routine-hating, short-term political economy. People feel the lack of sustained human relationships and durable purposes. The people Sennett interviewed, according to him, are people who tried to find the depth of time beneath the surface, if only by registering unease and anxiety about the present.

His interviews include the similar group of people – programmers, system analysts and project leaders that I studied. The people who he interviewed were recently being downsized from the American IBM office. They were worried and were disquieted, too little resigned to their own uncertain fate under the aegis of change. Sennett writes:

Before they lost their jobs they rather complacently subscribed to belief in the long term unfolding of their professional careers. As high-tech programmers, they were meant to be the master of the new science. After they were let go, they had to try out different interpretations of the events which wrecked their lives; they could summon no self-evident, instant narrative which would make sense of their failure.

They felt betrayed by IBM as if the company had tricked them. Being tricked or betrayed means a disaster is hardly one’s own fault. According to Sennett, the sense of corporate betrayal struck most outside observers who came to the company at the time.

One official admits:

There is much more stress, domestic violence and need for mental services – directly linked to layoffs. Even inside IBM the environment has changed radically: they have great unease without their security. The sense of corporate betrayal struck most outside observers who came to the company at the time. It was a dramatic story: highly skilled professionals in a paternalistic company now treated with no more regard than lowly clerks or janitors.

They had hard time to give up possession of their old established reality and instead focused on finding external forces to blame. “The global economy”, based on

Sennett's interviews appeared as source of their misfortunes, particularly in its use of foreign workers. IBM had begun "outsourcing" some of its programming work, paying people in India a fraction of wages paid to Americans. The cheap wages paid to these foreign workers were cited as a reason had made the Americans redundant. More surprisingly, the company's communication network served as something like the Indians's Ellis Island, their port of immigration, since code written in Amenadabab arrived on a supervisor's desk as rapidly as code written in-house.

Sennett also observed that there was a change in the interviewees towards community in general. Formerly town aldermen and school board members, they have now dropped out from pursuing these offices. They have lost interest in civic affairs. The one community engagement the men do keep up, indeed pursue with even greater vigor, is membership and stewardship of their local churches. The youngest interviewee told Sennett: "When I was born again in Christ, I became more accepting, less striving."

Regarding their political attitude, Sennett observed that these people dwell comfortably in entrepreneurial disorder but fear organized confrontation. They fear the resurgence of unions, become acute and personally uncomfortable, fidgeting or breaking eye contact or retreating into taking notes, if forced to discuss people who, in their jargon are "left behind". Also, Sennett notes that they vote very conservative on the recent presidential election and are very much against more social "communitarianism".

## 5.2 ‘We’ versus ‘They’

Sennett’s interviews are with people who were already laid off and mine are with people still employed. What is striking is that in both cases the experiences of anxiety and unhappiness, the feeling of betrayal from the company were similar. Therefore, his study contributes substantially in answering my original question that I posed in the introduction.

*I kept asking myself why they are so unhappy, so depressed, unfriendly, socially withdrawn?* They still had jobs, still had their old high salaries, while many of their colleagues were to use the jargon were already “out on the street”. The creative work now was mostly done in India, and their tasks were downgraded to mainly support and maintenance, but these were simpler, more routine tasks. So, from the monetarily “rational” point of view they were rewarded more now than before, because they were paid the same as before, but now for simpler, more routinized and less demanding for training and efforts work.

Therefore, in addition to financial rewards, my subjects were driven by other motives, other norms and values were as important in addition to the high salaries. What I offered as an explanation is my thesis of the importance of the ideology of professionalism and I gave sufficient details to its support in the first chapter.

From the situation of high job satisfaction that was observed in the first chapter, most of programmers started saying now that they “hate their jobs”, that “they are here for the money”. They became resentful of corporate goals and objectives of the company



According to a programmer, on a question what he thinks about the company loyalty?

You must be joking. What kind of loyalty they can expect from me after they installed this machine to watch every minute of my time.. It shows they don't trust me. My professionalism means nothing to them.

The work cooperation deteriorated and the work relations became much more fragmented. According to a programmer:

Before the Badge machine was installed, we were encouraged the help each other, that was considered a professional duties, now you have to keep your head on the terminal all the time and work only on your tasks.

According to a business user:

I used to like to visit the programming department, just to chat and keep up relationships, now I hate to even go by, all these gray, unhappy faces.

Most of them became very suspicious and mistrustful:

We have been watched constantly. Even when they do not tell you, they are constantly watching. They know everything about each one of us. The knowledge produced by professionals is not important anymore. Everything is the balance sheet.

One commented on the "open market" policy and explained her take on the situation:

I believe, said she, that the reason outsourcing happened is because of the lobbyists. They convinced the congress to give the company tax breaks for companies who restructure in the given year. So, it became a fad to re-structure and outsource. Before business operated through connections and took many years to build the business. Now, MBA took over and everything is just the bottom line.

The American values of individualisms also were questioned. According to one programmer that I talked to:

In America everything is measured in money and the success of a person is measured only by his net worth, but the crisis thought them that there are other priorities.

Therefore, without some strong beliefs in the values of professionalism that used to structure their reality (Zizek, 1994) and assure their commitment to corporate goals,

their resentment towards Indian programmers became evident and extended to a resentment towards the management:

The systems that come back are “crap”, “garbage. And we have to fix their bugs. It is completely humiliating situation. But management does not care about quality any more. They are ready to sacrifice quality for lower expenses.

They hire these Indian programmers right out of school without any experience, they just throw into projects hundred of them.

Many of them believed that:

The outsourcing will fail and it is only a matter of time that the management will realize that. But by the time that happens, the technical skills and expertise of the American programmers will be lost and will be an awful situation.

An interesting observation was that information workers started describing their lifeworld using symbols not from the language of capitalism like before such as “success, career, self-esteem, professional development”, but more of a “traditional society”. We “need the job in order to support our family”, “to raise our children”, to “meet our responsibilities”. Their resistance was shown in the alienation not only from the values of the company but also from the values of capitalism.

After this change, the difference between “place and space (De Certeau, 1984) became more apparent. Information specialists started refereeing to corporation as “they” rather than “we” as it was before. They started relying more for friendships and moral support on private groups often created and separated by ethnic lines. I observed that, for example, before people will go to lunch with their work teams, now they started having lunch usually with people from their ethnic groups.

I observed now that the work time was watched and measured by the Badge Machine, information specialists started spending more time in the break room which

was inside of the building and therefore the minutes being there could not be recorded by the Badge machine. I would go by the break room at lunch and there were always be some of my colleagues there. People played cards or had lunches in small groups. It can be argued that there for the first time programmers were place in a situation that they had to share “space” with other service workers for whom “being on a time clock” was always part of their daily routine. Before the tactics of information workers were directed against management but were directed towards obtaining individual benefits, for example obtain specific training to be paid by the company and used on project development, tactics that Certeau qualifies as “manipulating and enjoying it”. However, in the new world the tactics that programmers started using could be better described as “make do” tactics of *bricolage* and there was a sense of resistance, lots of sense of resentment and “anti-discipline” (De Certeau, 1984). The difference between strategies of “enjoyment-in-sense” as “enjoy-meant (Zizek, 1994) that were described in the first chapter and these new strategies, strictly strategies of “make do” tactics of *bricolage*, are in support of the view that without the ideology of professionalism to structure their reality, disturbances in social integration, decrease “social solidarities”, anomie and rise of conflicts became apparent.

A Bible study group was formed. Several people would constantly carry Bibles with them. They would study them during breaks, take them to the lunch room and have Jesus signs over their desks. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that over one half of the native American born programmers were part of this group. These people consistently socialize with each other. It would not be wrong to say that this group became equivalent

to the other ethnic groups by the frequency of sociation with each other and speaking their own Bible (Jesus phrases) language.

One programmer tried to convince me that the “end of the world is coming soon”. It sounds like a joke, but it was not. He had on his desks the books on upcoming “rapture”. These books quite popular in the States now and especially in the South talk about how the world is soon coming to an end, the second coming of Jesus is inevitable and then he will take only the deserving ones with him and leave the others behind.<sup>5</sup> .

I am attaching an e-mail (**see Appendix B**) that Angela, a project leader wrote, it shows a situation very close to what Habermas (1991) calls a situation of “disturbed mutual understanding”, “culture and language that fail as a resource” , and elements of lifeworld as cultural facts that limit the scope of action and then often need a repair work of translators, interpreters and therapists. Attached e-mail is an example of deepening conflicts between management and information workers, social disorganization and ability to cope. The e-mail demonstrates how Angela, a very capable project leader (almost revered in the past by the business users) with whom I participated in many successful projects now can’t cope with situation and had to be treated by a social worker, company personnel consultant and psychiatrist. After many conflicts with management, finally she became so depressed that had to be treated by a psychiatrist. But before that the company hired for her a specialist who would coach her on how to be obedient and follow small rules. In addition Angela had to have multiple discussions

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<sup>5</sup> I personally think that those believers are really the ones who are “left behind” from rational thinking, from the modern world and reality.

with Human Resources personnel where in one conversation According to the e-mail, she threatened to kill herself because the coaching evidently was not at all agreeable to her.

On the other hand, I observed that a programmer who was originally from Korea who had a strong attachment to his Korean Church could cope much better. Also, one other project leader joined the Saddleback Orange County mega church. She was also pointing that in groups at that church they privately discuss what political measures can be taken. Were they all out there searching for a new ideology? In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Zizek (1989) identifies it as a search for “binding of our enjoyment to a certain signifying, symbolic formation which assures a minimum of consistency to our being-in-the-world “.Attending of religious churches, mosques, temples many of them organized accordingly different ethnic group criteria: Chinese, Vietnamese, Persians, became quite prevalent.

This is what I recorded from a conversation with a programmer in April 2009.

It seems I found what is missing in the world right now, and this is a security. I feel secure there; I feel that this church will not go away next day. The community there also made me feel welcome, something that I needed after the trauma of the layoff. I thought that I was an atheist, but growing a protestant, now I feel that I am coming back to my roots. The way it started was completely amazing. I went alone the first time and something about the sermon really touched me and it is hard to explain what, but I started sobbing and pulling one by one all my paper napkins until I used them all. And this is how all began and know I am one of those who had given his life to Jesus.

I am incline to think that these activities are just an indicator of high level of stress between values and norms and although can bring some psychological relief to actors, overall in relation to the smaller structure (information workers, management and

company) will have not any serious effect where the disturbances of social integration, decrease “social solidarity”, anomie and rise of conflicts will prevail for long time.

So, why my subjects could not effectively and in any organized manner resist? It is not that they did not understand the situation. Therefore that “false consciousness” idea was not be applicable here. In fact, in the conversations they constantly expressed their understanding of the situation. One reason, they were almost paralyzed by the fear of layoffs. Regarding the subject of resistance on a small scale, Lefebvre (1991) discusses “the rights to the city”. He makes a utopian proposition that is pretty close to Habermas’ (1991) theory of communicative action by that reforms should start on a lower level. Citizens and city dwellers should be able to appear in all networks and circuits of communication, information and exchange, so that the fragmentation between conceived and lived space be removed and the unity between space and place achieved (Lefebvre, 1991).

Similar, in my empirical example, the way to achieve unity between information workers and corporation was to make sure that technical specialists had access to all channel of communication and ability to participate in all corporate decisions, to be able to defend their interests, their professionalism, even may be renegotiate their high salaries to somewhat lower in exchange for keeping their old status. However, the reality became very different. In fact, in the last few years I observed increased level of secrecy and less and less ability of professionals to participate in the business decisions. One of the project leaders who experienced layoff from a different company on a question of how did the layoff happen?

It was totally “out of the blue”. Nobody knew that was coming. Management at one point became really secretive. The way I was laid off was totally awful. I was blamed in front of my people for things that I did not know were happening. I was made an scape goat for a business decision that I had nothing to do with it [*here it did not become clear what was that business decision*].

I was curious whether they would consider unions as an option of social participation, so

I asked one programmer what does he thinks about it? He said:

I would definitively be against unions. This is the last thing I would consider – to be manipulated by some “mafia” people.

This observation is pretty close to that of Sennett (1998) who observed that these people dwell comfortably in entrepreneurial disorder but fear organized confrontation.

Therefore, without the ideology of professionalism the stock of knowledge (Berger 1986; Habermas 1991) of information workers on how to deal with situation became insufficient. In some way, in my empirical case the Habermas’ (1991) societal system is brought back and also as in Swidler’s (1986) theory about the “unsettled time”, actors look for cultural resources out there in a more global society outside from their immediate lifeworld in order to rebuild it. However, we have to take in consideration that we are dealing here with competing ideologies (religion in our case) and their impact and influence will be able to be measured only in a much more prolong period of time and depends on many other structural constraints.

Our observations demonstrate how without the ideology of professionalism at this company the old antagonisms (Zizek, 1994) between the workers and the capital came to be more obvious, however I did not find evidence of any organized resistance or attempts to regain back the old status. The question of resistance is somewhat problematic in this paper and further studies are needed. Being raised in European ideals I believe that resistance has to be organized, confrontational and I did not find any of this sort. Angela,

my only example of a person who tried to oppose the system ended up as you see from the e-mail “neutralized” with drugs, treated by a psychiatrist. Sennett (1998) points that the programmers exhibited resistance by dealing with failure in a “pre-post-modern sense”, in groups they discuss the situation and strive for coherence and solid authorial “I”. I would agree to it, but to some extent. As per my observations which I presented in this chapter, people looked for group support but not a wide one from the social group of informational professionals of the company. In the opposite, they withdrew to groups separated by ethnic lines or in some occasions newly formed groups (Bible group for example) which to me is a sign for passive resignation and an acknowledgment of the weight of objective reality.

## 6 Conclusion

It seems the results of this study are quite bleak. The subjects of my study have no other choice but to accept their downgraded position and rebuilt their lifeworld similar to other working class people who retreat into religion.

One programmer told me with a great resignation:

I have to accept every day as a new day; and think about only this day; this is my survivalist strategy

When I started this study I wanted to find resistance and I wanted to prove the “Leaky Black Boxes” (Latour & Callon, 1992). However, the study demonstrated the opposite - the corporate management actually used the situation to increase its instrumental control and installed techniques for more efficient managing of time and space of the information professionals. Therefore, it can be argued that capitalism is



coming back, mobilizing itself, reinforcing his old locus of accumulation as a clear goal of the system (Comaroff, 2001). As a result the corporation was able to severely curbed the old status of professionals and with a help of the Badge machine to reconstruct them as “docile” bodies (Foucault, 1974). It seems the same year Foucault wrote *Discipline and Punish*, Henry Braverman (1974) wrote his influential book, *Labor and Monopoly Capital. The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* analyzing the de-skilling of craft workers and predicted that the professionals too were not immune to this deskilling and degrading of their work, and he suggested that it was only a matter of time before they would encounter the fate of the craft workers in the capitalist workplace. As we see from the study, the time for this came, the fate of the subjects I study paralleled very much the experiences of Newman’s highly skilled craft workers at the Singer factory whose position was downgraded and similar to our Badge Reader, a Standard Machine for Panoptical Surveillance installed in the factory.

The logical conclusion from my study is apparently the increasing of instrumental control, installing new techniques for more efficient managing of information professionals’ time, enforcing discipline, increasing control, improving efficiency, removing people who were not efficient enough. But if we look for a more globalized societal meaning of these events, it becomes apparent that the success of capitalist project is no longer dependent on the middle class ongoing support and commitment. In this frame reference: “the corporation does not care anymore about us” translates into “success of the capitalist project does not depend on our commitment any more”.

Of course this study has serious limitations. It does not speak for high tech, highly mobile young nomads of the new globalized era. The informational professionals included of my study are all middle-aged who stayed committed to mainframe computers at a time when the growth in the industry occurred in the personal-computer sector. Also, these are people who stayed company-dependent and believed in the promises of corporate culture and complacently subscribed to belief in the long term unfolding of their professional careers at one company without taking risks to be in charge of their own careers. So, my study is quite limited, but at the same time, it is quite representative of many middle-aged information professionals who will be stuck behind the walls of the big corporations for the years to come maintaining the mainframe systems, paying mortgages, supporting kids through college, trying to make sense of their day to day life and maintain middle class existence.

John and Jean Comaroff (2007) in *Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts in a Second Coming* pessimistically conclude that Millenarianism will survive the millennium. “Today’s apocalypse will become tomorrow’s mundane reality, laying down the terms of a dialectic out of which human beings will struggle to make sense of the world, to make livelihoods, politics, communities”. However, their article ends on an optimistic note with a quote from a leading unionist: “The end of the century is the starting point of... an international labor fight back... Global unionism is born”. They say that we can only hope and the history will determine the substance of the politics of the twenty-first century. And they continue that “we find it unimaginable that innovative practice will not emerge to address the excesses of neoliberal capitalism. But this is the future. For now, we seek to stress the epistemic importance of critical distance, of a refusal to be seduced

into treating the ideological tropes and surface forms of the culture of neoliberalism”. My study is a modest contribution to this line of refusal and with help from sociological theory of leading modern theorists an attempt to express a critical distance that John and Jean Comaroff are calling for.

## 7 Appendix A

### 7.1 Interview Questions

The interviews included but were not limited to the following questions:

1. Describe your educational and ethnic background.
2. Describe the reasons for which you have chosen programming (systems analysis, project leaders, DBA, etc.) as a profession (occupation).
3. List what do you like best about being a programmer (systems analyst, project leader, DBA)?
4. Describe what do you dislike most about being a programmer (systems analyst, project leader, DBA)?
5. Describe an event that occurred in the course of your professional life which made you feel really “empowered”. Describe how did you deal with the situation? Elaborate on your feelings and emotions.
6. Describe one or more events in the course of your professional life that made you feel really “powerless” i.e. “not-having-any-control” over a situation. Describe how did you deal with the situation. Elaborate on your feelings and emotions.
7. Elaborate on what do you consider the most valuable reward the computer profession has given you. You can name more than one (e.g. survival, way out of poverty, money, personal satisfaction, professional challenge, power over other people, etc.). These are only examples. Please feel free to put it in your own words.

8. How would you describe your ideal for a manager?
9. Do you like to work in teams? Describe your negative and the positive experiences.
10. If you could characterize the computer as a “human being” how would you describe it?
11. If you were financially secure (i.e. inherited a lot of money, won a lottery) would you choose computer programming as a profession all over again. Why?
12. If you could start your life all over again, would you choose computer programming as a profession all over again. Why?
13. Would you like your children to become computer professionals?
14. Name a item that you truly enjoy spending money.
15. Name a very favor activity that you enjoy pursuing during your leisure time.
16. How would you describe your political orientation? In your own words describe the reason for your preferences.

## 8 Appendix B

**From:** Steve & Angela Barrett

**To:** clarelewin@aol.com

**Subject:** Re: Hello

**Date:** Mon, 8 Sep 2008 5:29 pm

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Angela Barrett wrote:

Hi Clare,

The medication the doctor gave me is wonderful, I do not feel stressed at all or depressed. His advise was to re-connect and have a good time and not think about work. I also try to make dinner every night so I have regular meals. Hopefully I will be able to keep this up now that I am back at work. Many people were happy to see me back and came over to say so, except for Debbie who was her usual unfriendly self.

The doctor released me back to work for August 20, but I received an email from Debbie that Lisa Allen wanted to meet with me to discuss what happened at 9 am. After waiting for her for 30 minutes she asks me to join her in a room and then proceeds to tell me I have broken company policy for threatening to kill myself and tells me that she meet with a committee and they decided to give me a verbal warning. I was really surprised, then she proceeds to tell me that I told her and Debbie that "if I had a gun I would kill myself". I told her that was not true and that I never said that to her that what I told her was that I was having a panic attack and needed to leave to get my son for an appointment, and what I told Debbie was that I was having a panic attack from the coaching and that Jonathan made me feel so worthless that people like me should not be allowed to work and should be taken out back and shot and that no job is worth how he made me feel. I also asked her why she was not interested in asking me or discussing what happened during that coaching session that triggered me to have a panic attack? She said she would meet with later to discuss this. We both know that will never happen.

Anyway she said that in order to be allowed to return to work I had to contact their employee assistance program and she gave me an 800 number of guy to contact. I told her my doctor had sent a return to work letter that said stated I could return to work. She said she did not have access to that correspondence and she needed this person from EPA to tell her I was not a threat to her self. I told her my doctor was a certified psychiatrist. Anyway before leaving I asked her if she could provide me a copy of doctor's letter to them, which she promptly went to get for me.

After the meeting I called the EAP number and Dr. in psychology who runs the organization out of Denver and explained to him what had happened and that I have a letter from doctor to return to work, and he was surprised that this letter was not sufficient. I also called the doctor who the next day sent them a new letter specifically stated that I was never suicidal.

This EAP organization took from the 20th until the 27th to get me an appointment with a lady with a masters in social work who was going to evaluate me. Who I told what I thought was going on and the purpose of this referral and not accepting my doctor's note was to have something else to write up and give me a verbal warning. She said she was going to give her input to the EAP manager and someone would get back to me. Then she calls me the next day to see if I can come in on Friday for a second appointment. The company pays them for 3 appointments, so everyone has their own business agenda.

About 30 minutes before leaving for the appointment Debbie calls me and asks me if I can come back to work on Tuesday 9/2, I told her yes. But later when I meet with this social worker, she tells me that she has just written up her assessment stating I could return to work. Funny that Debbie was contacting me to return to work after my first appointment without having received anything from this EAP organization. It made it seem apparent that all they wanted to do was document this referral. Anyway HR told me that this additional time off, 8 days it turns out, was to be paid leave.

So how did my first day back go, great, I am happy to be back, I don't care what kind of work to do, I don't really have any expectation, except that I expect Debbie to never treat me well. She was already mad at me when I arrived Tuesday. When she called me she said to go in around 9 am in case my badge did not work to call her and she would come down and get me. She never told me she wanted to meet with me then. Because traffic was so bad I arrived at 9:10 am - and my badge worked so I did not call her. Then I called her that I had arrived, she acted all made that I was late the first day back and she was going to meet with and now she couldn't. She told me to my assignments were to clean my desk, change my phone message, change my computer message, and remove her from access to my email and attend at 2 pm SR meeting but specially she told me not to ask any questions. When I was done with my assignments, except with the meeting I sent her an email confirming what she told me to do and that they were complete and I would attend the meeting and not ask any questions. I also told her that I had 560 email to read. She later came over to my desk and in a very angry and hysterical tone told me to never send her an email like that again, and that she had not told me to not ask any questions, but that she would explain to me later the SR process. Something she never did, but instead of giving me a copy of the documentation on her desk, she sent me to get it from Irene Lee. She also told me I should only need 1 hour to go through the 560 emails, so what I did was sort them by sender and deleted most of them without reading them. What is wonderful is that I did not care or emotionally react to her. I again apologized to her for being late and calmly explained that the email was just confirming that I would exactly what she had instructed me to do. Yesterday I did not even see her. I think that if I minimize time with her I will be all right. Hygiene reminded me to not share anything personal with her or ask her anything personal and to just say yes to everything.

I have one more appointment with the master's in social work lady, who is 75 years old by the way. She was very nice she told me that I did not appear to have to any of the characteristics of

someone with aspergers, the psychiatrist said the same, and that the coach was full of it. She also told me was that I was very intelligent and that was scaring my management to death, and I just needed to tone it down and say nothing to them. I really liked her so maybe she can give me some advise on how to communicate to Debbie, but I think it is a lost cause.

I have 248 hours of vacation to take before January 1st, My cousin Samia and her husband are coming to visit the end of the month for 5 days, and we plan to go to LA Hollywood and Santa Monica with them and see the sights. I asked for 3 weeks end of October, but I am not sure what I will be doing or going. I wanted to go visit my family in Mexico, but I am waiting for the air flights to get cheaper. October is the low season. Steve did not get a teaching job, even though he had 5-6 interview at good schools, they wanted someone who also had chemistry, which he doesn't. He has finally resigned himself to look for engineering jobs, including maybe contracting. My younger son started college, so we are very tight on money right now. Now that I am back at work I will actively start looking for a new job that pays better. My goal is to get a job by end of October, so that I get paid for all my vacation, we'll see if I am successful, it may take me 6 months.

The risk of working for a toxic boss who hysterical and angry at me all the time is too great. My goal is to be the perfect employee and always be polite and apologize to her, so that she always feels in control. I don't really care and the work is very easy, my next assignment is to estimate the other states for agent assignment and to close out the last project, which she just left hanging while I was gone.

Pat Snyder is back, her knee is now working just fine. Leif seems to be his chipper self. He is the only democrat among us, so I bought him a cute beanny baby 'blue donkey' which represents the democratic party.

Regards,

Angela



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