Part I “Roads to Resistance” The Growing Critique from Managerial Ranks in Organization

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I ‘re-discovered’ the phenomenon of resistance while I was searching for new patterns of power and domination in organizations in the mid 1990s. Theoretically, I thought at that time that a ‘rehabilitation’ of the study of ‘sovereign’ power and of organizations as structures/projects of domination was necessary, at least because this topic had been slightly neglected by the post-modernist ‘turn’ and by resource-based sociologies of power (Courpasson 2000a). Quickly, I realized that the new organizations that I suggested calling ‘soft bureaucracies’ (Courpasson 2000b) were more complex settings than places merely opposing central managerial powers to a grassroots peripheral agency. Nothing very original here, except, maybe, that I started gathering stories where resisters were looking like the most compliant and ‘highly committed’ actors in the workplace: middle managers. The old question of resistance as power could be [re] posed in new terms, because interestingly, it was about understanding how ‘new organizations’, through their very liberal and distributed structuring and discourses, could trigger resistance and critique from their most loyal representatives. Lucky encounters also led to this reflection, like in 2003 when I met Georges, a former Marketing Director in a bank, in a supermarket. Georges became an associate professor in a business university in sociology, after having been one of the most efficient and convinced managers of his company for 10 years. Again, nothing very original here. Maybe not; of course, social structures, social norms as well as structuring practices, are always up for grabs. The idea that social systems are de facto contested entities is an enduring conviction shared by most power theorists. For example, oligarchic regimes, while designed to perpetuate themselves, are constantly confronted with destructuring agencies arising from the grassroots, or initiated by organizational leaders themselves (Osterman 2006). The capacity to resist power structures is constantly shown in regular expressions of discontent from subjugated groups that do not aim to transform the organizational status quo (Scott 1990) but do not wholly consent to it. In this paper, I highlight a form of resistance that is situated between large collective protests (Fantasia 1988) and ‘everyday adaptations to a life of discontent’ (McFarland 2001: 615). I analyze stories of resistance within middle managerial ranks and resistance that arises from the critiques that middle managers are capable of articulating in the face of decisions affecting them or other individuals in the workplace. I posit that the phenomenon of managerial resistance is an emerging sign of a growing critique emanating from a population usually described as rather conservative.

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1. In the paper we analyze middle managerial rebellions confronting upper managerial decisions/policies. We define middle management here as a very extensive group of employees ranging from relatively lower ranked ‘team supervisors’ to upper level business unit managers.
(Jackall 1988), as well as a phenomenon that recreates possibilities for middle managers actively to participate in the negotiation of workplace relationships. In other words, managerial resistance is a struggle about values, as well as a struggle about the place of middle management in contemporary organizational change. In this paper I contend that this place is currently being rethought because of new tensions produced by certain features of what are usually called the ‘new organizations’ (Child and McGrath 2001).

Broadly speaking, these tensions relate to the growingly ambiguous status of managers, who are on the one hand confronted by subordinate missions and tasks, and who are severely controlled by central managerial authorities, and on the other hand, who are systematically encouraged to act as powerful entrepreneurs. Through their actions the question that many managers ask these days is “what is the actual mission of over-controlled autonomous entrepreneurs?” Beyond the individual level, tensions can also be seen to underlie political and organizational dynamics in post bureaucracies (Heckscher and Donnellon 1995). Post bureaucracies are political settings where, while authority is supposed to be more distributed according to the principle of ‘hierarchy’ (Stark 1999), power channels largely operate to impose an all-encompassing ideology of high commitment and conformity (Tourish et al. 2009; Courpasson & Reed 2004). The classical distinction between authority, as the legitimacy of a given ‘center’, and power, as the ‘peripheral’ capacity to act (Shils 1961), is re-emerging in these dynamics. In other words, I have the conviction that the study of managerial resistance is an interesting means to better grasp wider political transformations in the workplace, but more importantly to relativize a tendency to overemphasize the ‘totalizing’ dimension of new organizations. Yes, post bureaucracies are shaping and reshaping principles and practices of control and coercion. But they are also shaping new means of temporarily and, no doubt, partially escaping from this coercion. Again this is nothing new. Research on social movements suggests how challenges from below in organizations (Rao et al. 2000) or from outside (King 2008) are capable of pushing specific claims from actors whose legitimacy has constantly to be strategically and politically sustained, and who are likely to influence management decisions subsequently. Recent research on resistance also examines some conditions for challenging organizational policies and practices that rest upon a broad variety of acts of rebellion, all fabricated in the tension between the meaning of ‘being a controlled subordinate’ and the meaning of ‘having agency’ (Thomas and Davies 2005; Courpasson & Dany 2009; Spicer & Böhm 2007). That is to say they are made up in terms of the processes through which actors legitimize certain forms of legitimacy and exclude others (Flyvbjerg 1998). Through this process of resistance, actors discover their ‘extraordinary abilities’ to take Mary Parker Follett’s words, and their capacity to invert the structure(s) of power, even for a short while. Managerial resistance is a means to concretely experience the autonomy that ‘new organizations’ are supposed to give to actors.

Indeed, to go a step further, I contend that it is in the actors’ striving to
reduce this tension between being subordinated and having de facto broader scopes of agency that most forms of resistance take shape in organizations today. Actors experience the encouragement to behave as ‘entrepreneurs’ while being submitted to an unprecedented level of pressure. This paper offers an illustration and a theoretical interpretation of how some new roads to resistance are therefore opening in organizations because of this dual experience at work. Firstly, because certain actors decide, for reasons that will be explained, to shift the emphasis of their working lives, at least temporarily. Secondly, because other actors discover along the way that their resistance opens up new projects for themselves and their fellow rebels, and is likely to give pause to oligarchic power.

In this paper, I therefore attempt to highlight that contemporary management, while long being established on the necessity of preventing occasions of resistance is paradoxically contributing to developing intra-organizational resistance, in particular from the managerial ranks, by forcing people to work under an excessive tension between, to put things simply, their power and their powerlessness. This tendency helps to reshape the classical dichotomy in theories of power between ‘power over’ and ‘power to’. To put things simply, ‘power over’ is a way to limit the field of action of individuals, while ‘power to’ is a way to generate autonomy (Göhler 2009). In other words, it suggests how, while neo-bureaucratic regimes of government still have a strong tendency to apply the ‘power over’ dimension by relentlessly controlling the actual work of managers, the tensions created by this very control push certain actors to resist and consequently to reconstitute the social conditions of ‘power to’ dimensions in the workplace.

**A BIT OF CONTEXT: THE PROBLEM OF BUREAUCRACY WITH REBELLION**

Bureaucracy has been devised by Weber to concentrate the means of administration and of control over these means, under the tutelage of a rule-governed system of government. Weber stipulates that bureaucratic domination means fundamentally domination through knowledge… This consists on the one hand in technical knowledge which, by itself, is sufficient to ensure it a position of extraordinary power. But in addition to this, bureaucratic organizations, or the holders of power who make use of them, have the tendency to increase their power still further by the knowledge growing out of experience in the service (Weber 1968: 225).

Bureaucracy, as an ideal type, is intended to reduce the politics of discussion, deliberation and decision among the members of the organization by giving great power to the top through control over the use and production of knowledge. Bureaucracy represents rule by legitimate oligarchic systems founded on the concentration of knowledge in the hands of the “ruling few”.

Both Weber and Michels, Weber’s contemporary, agreed that whatever the organizational and social characteristics of collective organizations,
they would eventually come to be dominated by bureaucracy and oligarchy (Lipset et al. 1956; Jenkins & Perrow 1977)). From a Michelsian perspective, all attempts to change bureaucracy appear ultimately doomed; either oligarchs will absorb resistance (Leeds 1964), or resistance will create, at best, lower-level autonomy (Crozier 1964), power games (Crozier and Friedberg 1980, Pfeffer 1981, Hickson et al. 1971), or futility (Rubin 1995), as political struggles over meanings and resources traverse organizations (Lounsbury, Ventresca & Hirsch, 2003; Schneider & Bartley 2001).

It is well known that bureaucracy was designed to deal with certain conditions, usually understood as those of stable environments and mechanistic routines (Burns and Stalker 1961). While resistance was not absent from these scenarios, it both patterned and was patterned by industrial bureaucracy (Gouldner 1954). Resistance was mostly a means of ‘making out’ against the dictates of machines and of systems of rules (Roy 1952; Hodson 1995). That said, new logics of internal resistance have emerged within contemporary workplaces. New power asymmetries have arisen (Child and McGrath 2001) and horizontal collaborations straddling professional cultures are more necessary, while authority seems to be more distributed (Kellogg, Orlikowski & Yates 2006) in ‘new organizations’. Traditional bureaucratic systems seem unable to cope with these new situations because these logics are different from those with which bureaucratic managers were confronted in past decades. Linking the research on alternatives to bureaucracy to the question of resistance in the workplace is important because, theoretically, the Weberian definition of authority in organizations is founded on specific systems of power legitimation, and this despite resistance. Bureaucracy itself is established through the necessity of controlling, even avoiding resistance, because organization members do not mold themselves automatically into a bureaucratic form “by virtue of its own internal dynamics” (Langton 1984: 334). Thus, bureaucratic leaders have to neutralize countervailing sources of power; the process of bureaucratization appears therefore as a means of “attaining the highest degree of efficiency … the most rational means of exercising authority over human beings” (Weber 1968: 223), despite their resistance or through resistance avoidance.

Consequently, studies of bureaucracy as a form demonstrate that bureaucracy emerged out of struggles around the legitimacy of internal resistance against specific patterns of authority (Gouldner 1954). For instance, the work of Langton (1984) on the British Pottery Industry demonstrated the ways in which bureaucracy emerged as a control solution to problems of resistance in traditional ways of working and managing in the company. Hence, on this reading, bureaucracy emerged out of contestation as a legitimate form. Consequently, any new alternative to bureaucracy should start from a political agenda that hinges on issues of the legitimacy of internal resistance in the workplace; in other words, it should address how internal resistance affects organizational efficiency. Bureaucracy and its repertoire of routines would be unable to cope with the dysfunctions that resistance could bring about, and the political volatility of neo-bureaucratic contexts (Ciborra 1996). Resis-
stance in the ‘new organizations’ workplace is developing what Callon calls ‘hot situations’ (1998) such as situations of ambiguity, fluidity and emergence of unexpected strategies, tactics and behaviors, the opposite of bureaucratic characteristics.

As I suggested above, in organizations where authority is deemed to be more distributed, the issue of resistance and contestation takes on a new impetus because occasions of confrontation are numerous. In particular, logics of internal resistance are founded on one of the key principles of new organizations, namely empowerment. The logic of empowerment entailed in new organizations is likely to be overtly used and endorsed by certain key employees to resist specific decisions and/or to take unplanned and sometimes unorthodox initiatives. These initiatives shape an alternative political structure to that of bureaucracy, because organization leaders are constantly pushed to invent new responses to those acts from below. Managers can try to re-integrate resisting leaders in the organization orthodoxy while rewarding them for having “shaken” it. Often, they continue to see them as ‘troublemakers’, and consider dysfunctions and difficulties to derive from resistance (see Ford & al. 2008). Implicitly, resistance is seen as an irrational reaction against managerial decisions and policies, instead of being considered as resourceful and positive behavior. So new organizations, like bureaucracies, seem to have a problem with resistance, although for different reasons.

In this paper, I assume that the difficulty of new organizations to handle resisting activities, despite their anti-hierarchical façade, partly reflects the theoretical tension existing between power over and power to. There is an enormous problem for organizations to propose ways to collaborate with resisters, to create spaces where resisters’ claims can be taken into account despite profound differences in purposes, norms and meanings, as well as visions of business that emerge from these moments of resistance.

However, the necessity of creating what Galison calls a ‘trading zone’ (1997; Kellogg, Orlikowski and Yates 2006) is highlighted by the examples of resistance that I suggest in the next section. For Galison, the trading zone is ‘a social, material, and intellectual mortar binding together the disunified traditions of experimenting, theorizing and instrument building’ (1997: 803). Kellogg et al. specify that engaging in a trading zone suggests that ‘diverse groups can interact across boundaries by agreeing on the general procedures of exchange even while they may have different local interpretations of the objects being exchanged, and may even disagree on the intent and the meaning of the exchange itself’ (2006: 39).

The cases that I will rapidly use are intended to illustrate the difficulty of neo-bureaucracies of dealing with resistance, partly because they paradoxically handle resistance through extremely classical bureaucratic means and in particular, through entrenching central power’s prerogatives about certain managerial issues, like customer relationships (case 1) or high-potential careers (case 2).
RESISTERS AT WORK

Case 1: The bloggers of Insur: shifting the claims, inverting power.

I interviewed several actors of a resisting movement in a company called Insur, following a random inquiry on the net when I was looking for cases of collective insurgency in the workplace. I stumbled upon a website and got in touch with the Insur resisters through their newly launched blog. They wanted to 'publicize' their struggle.

Insur is a major player in the insurance sector in France. In 2006, the management decided to change profoundly the principles of remuneration of around 2000 salespeople. An addendum to their contract was signed by most unions and sent to the salespeople in September 2006. They had one month to sign the addendum and accept the new system, otherwise they would be fired.

The salespeople of Insur did not necessarily know each other. They were in charge of local commercial areas in different regions of France and seldom had the chance to meet and chat. Interestingly, around 200 of them decided to refuse the new system to be fired and left the company in early January 2007. Their reasons were numerous, and it is not the object of this paper to analyse them. However, in spring 2007, seven salespeople decided, officially and legally, to contest the layoffs and to start a resistance against both the procedure and the reasons given for the layoffs. They set up a website in 2008 with a blog, thus gathering not only the interests of the laid-off people but progressively extending their struggle and making it more and more public in order to get official support from diverse constituencies (journalists, columnists, politicians and intellectuals). Their struggle shifted in one year from issues of the trial (held in Paris on September 24th 2009), to broader issues about the very management of Insur. Their struggle did not concern the initial contractual and HR-related issues but rather how the management of Insur governed the organization, how they unduly pressured and harassed workers not to contact some of the ‘bloggers’, how they regularly surveyed their computers, how the evaluation of performance was changing from maintaining customer loyalty to getting as many new clients as possible without matching their needs, and how, in fact, oligarchic elites at Insur were abusing power. The objective of the bloggers was to show why these processes were detrimental to the future of the company. The struggle was therefore clearly political.

During the political process, several former Insur employees discovered their interest in contestation and shaping claims, in organizing the confrontation between the ‘community’ of the bloggers (more than 25,000 visits and around 3000 contributions by early 2010) and in devising arguments showing that the Insur bloggers were defending more than 200 illegitimately laid-off salespeople, that they were in charge of a wider debate about the values of contemporary management.

Today, their action is progressively modifying the balance of power between the bloggers and the company management. The latter are more and more afraid of ‘losing face’ and tend to increase the level of...
control over Insur’s employees and use rather violent means to make sure that customers are not going to leave the company’s portfolio to move to some of the individual companies that many laid-off employees have created subsequently. What appears here is that the only step that the management of Insur has taken is vividly bureaucratic. When resistance arises, bureaucracy comes back, while, as I have suggested above, research shows repeatedly that it is acting often innocuously against contentious behavior.

Michael 6: refusing a mission for the good of the company
I met Michael in 1994 during some research I was conducting in his company on changes in managerial jobs. He called me a couple of years later to tell me how he had been obliged to leave his job. One evening in December 1995, Michael, the production manager in a large textile factory, received a proposal to become the head of a facility in the North-East of France, with 320 employees. He had the implicit assignment of shutting down the facility as soon as the local, social and political conditions permitted. Michael procrastinated; it was a big deal, at 33 years old, but he was immediately torn between two feelings, pride because the big shots wanting to see him with a tough mission was stimulating, and embarrassment, because closing the facility awoke numerous personal memories and emotions about his father and grandfather’s struggles in their own textile factories back in the 1930s and 1960s. When thinking about being the ‘bad guy’ that his father used to talk about back at home, Michael felt dizzy and contested, especially in terms of the clash between his ambition as a terrific and compliant young executive and his values and emotions as the son of a radical and tough unionist, a tension that was shattering most of the evidence that he had about his own career.

Michael did not cope with the moral compromise that would be necessary to solve the tension between accepting the subordination that his status within the company supposed that he would accept, and the refusal of the sacrifice of personal values that such an acceptance implied. He decided to pass on the offer, considering it to be for the best of the company because, as he said, ‘ the mere fact that I was hesitating meant that I was not the right guy for the mission, I would screw up the whole thing and create havoc, so the company would be better off if I declined’. But the company would see this refusal as an unacceptable disobedience to the orthodox canons of sacrificial management; black or white, subordination or disobedience, these are the terms in which things are dealt with in this company. This cognitive rigidity rapidly drove Michael to leave the company because he felt he was way off the mark, although he was recognized as one of the most promising managers of the company. ‘Professional suicide’, according to managerial oligarchs. Beyond his confusion, Michael was sure to have made the right choice for the company, deciding according to the very criteria of contemporary HR management, that he was not cut out to be a ‘real’ manager. He would therefore take management at its word, thus showing the power of ‘consentful contention’ (Straughn
2005) in strategies of resistance, when, in a savvy manner, resisters use the very logics of the opposing camp to explain and impose their own claims.

**POWER OVER AND POWER TO**

I think that these two short stories offer an account of how actors are capable of shifting politics in the workplace from ‘power over’ to ‘power to’.

‘Power over’ presumes that at least one of the actors involved in a social relationship is able to execute ‘more’ power than others. This takes us back to the starting point of ‘power over’ analyses (Dahl 1961) which posits that the observable effects of power are the only significant elements that can be used to understand how certain options can be realized or not, or how certain actual decisions are made. This is what Lukes (2005) called the ‘one dimensional’ view of power. ‘Power to’ analyses do not put the emphasis on the effects of power, because power is not seen to be first and foremost directed at others. Rather, it is seen as a constitutive element of any social relationship; power is directed ‘at the individual or the group as actors themselves’ (Göhler 2009: 29). It is a capacity which can remain unexercised. The actor’s autonomy also resides in her capacity to decide whether given resources are going to be used or not. As Clegg & al. (2006) put it: “power will always consist of a complex contingent tension between a capacity to extend the freedom of some to achieve something and an ability to restrict the freedom of others from doing something or other” (191).

The stories of resistance expose how certain actors decide to operate a brutal shift from being restricted to being actors, while not being authorized to act. That is a definition which helps to understand managerial resistance; managers are supposed to comply and to act within severely restricted limits of autonomy imposed by neo-bureaucratic regimes of action (Courpasson & Clegg 2006). Their resistance implies, firstly, that they break these restrictive limits, and, secondly, that they do not need any authorization to do so, because they consider that the other camp (let us say the upper management) has broken other limits or has created new forms of incompatibilities in the manager’s working environment. In the case of Michael, the incompatibility between private life and the pressures of managerial work, what Courpasson and Thoenig (2010) call the ‘forbidden zone’, comes to a head when the mission is offered and the dilemma appears. In the case of the bloggers, the incompatibility between ‘doing a good job’, or ‘respecting the customer as a person’, and the necessities of contributing to increasing year after year the profitability of the company, is growing or is more acutely perceived by Insur’s sales force because of the layoffs. Here I analyze resistance as a process of self-empowerment, because resisters gain and retain an autonomous power to act without being hierarchically empowered to do so. In that definition, ‘power to’ and ‘power over’ are complementary rather than incompatible; the authority of the company

7. The kind of expressions those bloggers use often to justify the struggle.
managers allows them to issue orders based on a certain vision of acceptable norms and actions but the very structure that these orders help to establish gives de facto resisters to their power to act. Indeed, resistance is triggered by this prevailing structuring of norms; resistance is a social power relationship which is developed thanks to the pre-existence of a given authority, rather than thanks to its broader distribution within the company. Resistance is also permitted by the fact that actors do not internalize those norms and usually acceptable practices; they develop a potential for acting against ruling power relations because of the tensions emerging in the contemporary workplace. They penetrate relations of power and fight them in actual struggles about these tensions. Now I suggest that the latter derive new forms of power regimes from the transformation of bureaucracies.

TENSIONS EXPLAINING REBELLION

Despite opposing claims made in a recurrent way by managerial rhetoric, as well as in research about new organizations, people feel clearly that organizational power is still mostly exercised according to the ‘power over’ gospel, in a dominating and self-serving manner. It is sometimes dressed up in charming and smiling outfits, but it is tighter than ever. Bosses smile most of the time and do not behave like stubborn sub-officers or mulish servants of an obscure administration. Managerial power is liberal is the sense that it suggests solutions, offers opportunities, opens debates, but behind the scenes of this managerial third-dimensional power, impersonal criteria and performance metrics do the violent job, and Michael’s resistance is filtered by these instruments and is eventually seen as a lethal mistake, according to those very criteria and metrics.

This smiling neo-bureaucratic power creates specific tensions in the workplace, especially for people occupying upper-middle managerial positions such as Michael. Torn between the identity of being ‘trustworthy’ employees and the diagnosis that they make every day of an increasing oligarchic atmosphere, they resist solving or overcoming these tensions, even if only for a short while, even when they are eventually expelled or exit willingly, even if the question posed by their resistance is not to ‘target oppression’, but to make a good job in acceptable social conditions.

Several growing tensions explain the resistance that develops into managerial ranks in post-bureaucracies. A first interesting tension is the coexistence of a neo-bureaucratic ‘culture’ of empowerment and of a growing ‘culture’ of precariousness within managerial populations. In other words, managers are facing the growing lack of fit between the ‘entrepreneurial’ injunction to take initiatives and being personally accountable, and the reality of job insecurity and of fierce competition between managerial populations. In a way, the resisters are those individuals who decide not to step back and remain
in silent postures of protection against those pressures. They decide not to toe the line anymore, not necessarily because they are born rebels, rather because the management itself pushes them to speed up their reflection about these pressures, because it requires them to make a quick decision in the face of a dilemma. To put things differently, resistors take the management at their word (Straughn 2005); they take the outfit of the ‘organizational entrepreneur’ and make a decision based on an expert diagnosis of the situation. They resist on the very basis of their expertise; they elaborate their claims and rationales in a savvy manner, not against management but in a cooperative way, saying that it is better for the organization not to send them to shut down a factory, or to force customers to buy whatever new insurance product. They shift from subordination to active struggling cooperation, which leads them eventually to create moments of emancipation (Courpasson, Dany and Marti 2010).

A second significant tension is the growing pressure of everyday practices of control over managerial work, together with the distanciation of the actual centers of power. Managers resist when they feel the pressure of control over their work and their performance without knowing who or what is exercising this pressure. In a way, this is not a new story, as it is the story of skilled workers and professionals struggling to defend their autonomy (Zald and Berger 1978; Smith 1990; Hodson 1995). Representatives of the central systems of control and evaluation are constantly changing, so that the relative stability of ‘grassroots’ production teams sharply contradicts the volatility of the “central expert” battalions. This tension is unacceptable for managers because they undergo severe restrictions in their autonomy and resources, while the functional populations in charge of major decisions are hardly ever physically present. In other words, the dissociation of the culture of the ‘managerial grassroots’ from the central neo-bureaucratic culture of the ‘controlling experts’ is at the heart of many individual and collective acts of resistance today, which take the shape of infighting between managers. This is the core of the Insur bloggers’ critique; the growing discrepancy between the oligarchic ability of central managers to impose a certain vision of managing people and customers and the subsequent rules of the game at Insur, and the claimed professional incompetence of those managers that is leading the company into a new form of internal social struggle which might be irretrievable. To put it in Bourdieu’s terms (1998), the ‘left hand’ of the organization would be competing with the ‘right hand’ to solve this tension; the left hand describes those managers who, willingly or not, take in charge some of the struggles against the central right hand of the company, representing the managers obsessed with the question of short-term financial equilibrium. The ‘left hand’ has the sense that the ‘right hand’ no longer knows or no longer really wants to know what the left hand does, and why they should encourage, understand and listen to acts of which the right hand disapproves because it sees those acts as resistance against the legitimate central organizational apparatus. This struggle between managers is a new kind of conflict within organizations. It signals the potential emergence of an alternative intra-organizational power, the power of resistance.
THE POWER OF RESISTANCE

Through their acts of resistance, Insur’s bloggers and Michael, like many others, are transforming contemporary organizations. More precisely, they reinstall social logics and create new knowledge within managerial ranks. I suggest that three major effects of managerial resistance are taking shape in today’s neo bureaucracies.

Shaping new cultures of solidarity within managerial ranks

In most organizations, solidarity seems to be a figure of the past. But the stories that I have rapidly presented in this paper, as well as many others, suggest that new cultures of solidarity might be emerging in the process of resistance that we describe here.

Research has already demonstrated how solidarity and collective identity are produced and sustained in the process of struggle: the idea defended by Calhoun (1991) or by O’Hearn (2009) is that solidarity is not necessarily a pre-condition for struggles to arise, but that it can be an outcome of those struggles. This is clearly what is happening for the Insur bloggers. Their resistance is forging a ‘remote’ solidarity among people who participate in the discussions that the blog is stimulating. Participating in this activity is not necessarily risky, except for some bloggers who are clearly identified, and who have had the experience of suffering from personal repression. But the regular exchange of ideas and expression of emotions, combined with the fact that the bloggers are in a legal procedure against the company, is re-defining the boundaries of the rebellious collective body, supposing the appropriation of a collective space of debate which, in turn, encourages practices of participation, opening new possibilities and topics of resistance.

The growing concentration of a political and cultural creativity through the critique of the company’s management and of management in general, re-configures the action of resisters, and leads some of them to think that ‘they are becoming some kind of professional activists, after having been salespeople for years’. Now that their action directly challenges the power of the company, it turns into a collective campaign gaining ground and triggering more and more support from the employees of the company and from outside the company’s boundaries. The interest of this case is to highlight an interesting creative phenomenon; the group of resisters was not predisposed to solidarity; quite the contrary, salespeople were living and working in different areas, being de facto in competition while not knowing each other. But still, the struggle has created new spaces for exchanging ideas, zones of unexpected cooperation and dialogue between previously anonymous colleagues. The core group of the seven coordinators is surely now made of friendship and ‘unforgettable moments of sharing’, as one of them told us.

The case of Michael is more ambiguous. It is easy to see in this episode of resistance the individualistic act of a nakedly ambitious young manager who decides to avoid what he considers to be a mission doomed to failure and who does not want to pick up the pieces. But the story is also about the overt and deliberate expression of strong values competing with the officially recognized and legitimate values of management. The struggle between
values diffuses a new meaning in other places within the company, where some of Michael’s counterparts work. This new meaning is that it is possible to oppose the evidence of subordination and the consequential sacrifice of the private sphere imposed to high potential managers by the managerial ‘gospel’ about the model of the good manager. Here, the emerging solidarity within the high-potential young managers is more diffuse than within the community of bloggers; it is made of weak signs, messages of support, and it is punctuated by the rapid exit of other young managers some months after Michael’s exit. This inter-subjective solidarity is built by a collective common perception of an ethical and social confrontation between Michael and the management. No doubt that the multiplication of this type of individualistic resistance is likely to escalate into heightened cultures of inter-subjective solidarity within highly individualistic populations, a behaviour that should lead organizations to revise their conception of resistance in the workplace.

**Consentful contention: growing networks of critique within organizations**

The revisions highlighted are all the more important as, beyond the potential seeds of solidarity emerging out of the resistance that I describe in this paper, the forms of resistance are complex and difficult to label as simply adversarial or as simply cooperative. In fact, they are both, which renders their ‘treatment’ more problematic and gives unexpected power to the resisters. Straughn (2005) has recently captured this duality of oppositional and cooperative action in analyzing how citizens of the German Democratic Republic openly contested official directives by appealing to the state’s own ‘dominant ideology’. He labels this resistance “consentful contention”. He describes this political genre of contention in an authoritarian context as being situated somewhere between perfect quiescence and systematic resistance (2005: 1601). This form of resistance is interesting as to the case of managerial resistance because it looks strikingly similar to what managerial resisters are actually doing. Consentful contention is a genre of political engagement in which “the claim maker enacts the persona of a dutiful citizen, while contesting specific actions or policies of the state” (Straughn 2005: 1601). This genre is likely to develop in neo-bureaucratic organizations, where the managerially ideological claim to govern according to distributed forms of authority, logics of empowerment and entrepreneurial models of behaviour supplies workers, in particular managers and skilled professionals and experts, with more opportunities to contest this very claim simply by taking management at its word (Straughn 2005: 1602). For instance, Michael exercises his duty of being the responsible, accountable manager that he is supposed to be by contesting the reasons of his ‘promotion’; his refusal is based on the very objectives of achieving the mission that the managers want him to accept, and on his assumption that by refusing, he also uses the entrepreneurial power with which he is endowed. The Insur bloggers overtly criticize managerial choices by taking for granted managerial criteria such as the quality of customer relationships. They perform the role of dutiful managers while contesting, according to their knowledge of professional standards, the underlying claims of managerial decisions and policies. They invoke the very ideas and objectives of management and they use the language of management to
perform their resistance. They can do that because they are management experts themselves, because they know the business and because they understand the ‘dominant ideology’ of management, having been active servants of this ideology for years.

This resistance genre is powerful on three levels. Firstly, it shifts resistance in the workplace from small scale subversive activities or sporadic everyday insurgencies to a more substantial and permanent critique of management ideologies and objectives. As a result, informal networks of critical dissent emerge within managerial ranks today, based on the very expertise of managers in business and organizational issues, as well as on the growing shared feeling that being a ‘subordinate’ manager means, increasingly, belonging to a sort of ‘invisible social class’ straddling organizational boundaries. Secondly, as Straughn reminds us, the political resistance based on consentful contention clouds the boundary between consent and dissent, which is more ambiguous. By the same token, upper management decisions about whether resistance of that kind should be sanctioned or not is rendered more difficult, which gives more space to managers to express dissent without risking their job. Thirdly, the scope of resistance left out by neo-bureaucratic settings is wider than in traditional bureaucracies; consequently, the line between what is tolerated as critique and what is not is more ambiguous as well, all the more so as managerial rebels do have the capacity to articulate claims that share the actual standpoint of upper management (Straughn 2005: 1606). As one of the Insur bloggers puts it: “we are acting for the organization treating its customers fairly, not the other way round”.

Resisting appears, therefore, to be a real job aiming to improve organizational practices rather than seeking to create useless disruptions.

The “professionalization” of managerial workplace resistance?

The roads to resistance are open because neo-bureaucratic regimes of power have a problem with most kinds of contention and dissent. Organizations can no longer invest in supposedly genuine rhetorics and policies about entrepreneurship (through an ethics of autonomy) and sustainable responsibility (through an ethics of accountability) while denying middle and upper middle managers the right to disagree and to voice their disagreement. This is all the more true as the similarity between resisting skills and managerial skills is striking. In other words, working as a manager for years creates specific abilities and capacities to organize a resistance and/or to participate in a given movement of contestation. The story of the bloggers is a case in point. Here the ‘drift’ from claims based on the issue of retribution to claims based on an articulated critique of the management of the company has a political meaning. It is a case where a process of ‘professionalizing resisters as resisters’ is under way. Several resisters discover along the way their interest in this type of political activity; they experience a form of ‘emancipation’ that they realize is a key to overcoming personal frustrations and to continuing the combat against the company management. Secondly, they also realize that they are good in this domain; they analyze managerial discourses with their expertise in business and their knowledge of the company terrain, they investigate with documents about the company, statistics about
the personnel and so forth with enjoyment; they are extremely efficient in shaping new kinds of networks based on external sociabilities and converging interests, in organizing a dialogue between individuals from within the company as well as outside the company, including some customers, who take clear positions and express opinions on the blog. The savvy usage of internet, videos, imagery and symbols, is the manifestation of a collective capacity to act politically, without necessarily having the official support of more institutional channels of action.

TO CONCLUDE

Resistance proves to offer opportunities to take contemporary management at its actual word. In that sense, managerial rebels seem to consent to the socio-political order imposed by management, but not from the ‘wholesale internalization of dominant values’ (Femia 1981: 35) of management, rather, from the shared feeling that the current state of affairs and decisions is not viable for the company. So the question posed by Tilly ‘...why do subordinates comply?’ although they feel that something wrong is going on in the company management, can be addressed from the perspective of the resistance, not of consent.

Resistance shows that organization members are not mystified by managerial rhetorics, nor constantly repressed. They are aware of their true interests. But resistance is costly (Tilly 1991: 594). Indeed, the argument made by James Scott might well be right; the dominated are always resisting, everywhere, covertly or overtly (Lukes 2005: 13). Current resistance is creating not only new types of ‘organizational activists’ in the workplace; it also develops the capacity of critique of members as well as new knowledge about the process of resistance itself. Such actions also confirm that people do not always fail to recognize the sources of their desires, interests and projects; in other words, that ‘power to’ might well be back, because as Jon Elster (1983) has put it, willing compliance to domination cannot be generated by the imposition of internal constraints.

Some of the rebels in today’s organizations seem to go against the state of mind of the ‘underdog’ who ‘learns to bear the burden so well that he or she overlooks the burden itself’ (Sen 1984: 308). The question remains whether the accumulation of stories of resistance within managerial ranks is likely to disseminate the critique of managerial power(s) so that a more collective action is made possible (Ewick and Silbey 2003).

But this is another story.
REFERENCES


Power and Resistance: Variations on “what’s going on politically in and around organizations?”


