

Chapter 7: Anonymous Workblogging and Social Change

Introduction

This dissertation set out by considering three major competing theoretical orientations against which to evaluate the anonymous workblogging phenomenon. The first, a *pro-capitalist* scenario that draws on Drucker, Welch, Lundin, and Barsoux, is that some employees are bad-seeds who refuse to attach themselves to the benign goals and culture of the organization. The second, a *critical but pessimistic* scenario that draws on Burawoy, Mills, Kunda, and Wilmott, holds that knowledge workers are alienated yet consent to capitalism because of the way the cultural apparatus and the labor process itself conceal exploitation and absorb resistance. The third, a *critical but optimistic* scenario, applies the new class analysis of Gouldner, plus the contributions of Scott, Marcuse, and de Certeau to today's knowledge workers, emphasizing the creative, conscious, and subversive striving of knowledge workers against the organizations in which they spend most of their time, while remaining very cautious about bloggers' potential for organized action.

This study rejects the pro-capitalist view and interprets anonymous workblogging from a critical perspective that strongly favors the third theoretical orientation – where the logic of transcendence is privileged even while acknowledging the system's powerful ability to absorb dissent and mask its contradictions. Examining the first fired blogger cases and the efforts by organizations to contain or co-opt the phenomenon, Chapter Three illustrates that a small number of bloggers and their audiences are committed to using the medium as a forum for critical dialogue about the labor process. It argues that increased surveillance has stifled the practice in its current form, but that rapid

technological change (such as Internet access via mobile phones that circumvent workplace networks) will create new avenues for technologically-enabled resistance. The subsequent chapter looks closely at writing and interview testimony from a small and disparate group of anonymous workbloggers from the Manchester/Lancashire region, whose broadly anti-capitalist values and interest in creative writing generate a solid countercultural community that promotes solid distancing from corporate culture and transforms ephemeral work experiences into a tangible and enduring creative product that embodies and nurtures resistance. Chapter Five takes a step back, looking broadly at anonymous workblogs and noting that, overall, they are both short-lived, highly heterogeneous in political perspective, and often of an inferior writing quality. This broader examination proposes that anonymous workblogs *in general* do not necessarily contribute to an anti-capitalist movement but suggests that there exist a small number of energetic, progressively oriented blogs that are well-written enough to cultivate the prolonged attention of like-minded readers and to connect to mainstream media. Situating this practice within a tradition of critical writing about the white collar workplace, Chapter Six argues that creatively talented and critical anonymous workbloggers effectively contribute to the formation of a counter-hegemonic bloc that advances a progressive social agenda in spite of the fact that these worker-authors generally do not see themselves as activists.

Drawing on findings of the previous chapters, this section returns to the theoretical discussion, presenting three scenarios, as they pertain to anonymous workblogging, and attempting to situate the practice within an existing theoretical

tradition, while modifying that tradition to acknowledge the sophisticated yet maverick contribution of creative resisters.

Three Scenarios for analyzing anonymous workblogging

1. Bad Seeds

Pro-capitalist theory, stemming from Peter Drucker (1973), and continued in a more aggressive vein by Jack Welch (2005), suggests that anonymous workbloggers are misfits or “bad seeds,” particularly misanthropic or cynical individuals whose behavior is due to a fundamental lack of team spirit and perhaps self-destructive impulses that spring from their own ineptness and lack of appreciation of the benign nature of dynamic, decentralized capitalism. At best, they are badly suited to their current role and might possibly function better if they could find a job to which they were better suited.

A milder pro-business interpretation, based in Barsoux’s work, and supported by recent blog research (Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Richards, 2007), might hold that the venting of anonymous workbloggers is a relatively healthy and innocuous activity that stems from the absurd and comedic aspects of business or, perhaps, the conflicts and frustrations that arise from the system’s inevitable imperfections. These employees are understood to be generally sympathetic to the firm, understanding that capitalism is on the whole the best system. They must be made aware of the boundaries of workplace satire and cautioned about the impact that their humorous postings might have on the reputation of the company. Those who don’t understand this, fit the “bad seed” diagnosis and should be fired without delay.

2. Consent and containment

The next scenario is a critical yet pessimistic interpretation that draws on the work of Horkheimer (2001), Burawoy (1979), and Kunda (1992), among other containment theorists whose work was reviewed in Chapter One. Anonymous workblogging, in this scenario, has arisen from the alienation of knowledge workers, who experience dissonance between the ideology and culture of the organization and their own values. Knowledge work is subject to the logic of capital, which makes employees continuously vulnerable to downsizing, and requires them continuously to adjust to new directions and priorities set by the firm. Also, knowledge work nurtures self-management and organizational transparency, giving rise to questions about the limits on employee power. There is thus a sharpened contradiction between labor and capital, leading to ever more Orwellian control techniques that aggressively colonize workers' hearts and minds in order to cover up ongoing exploitation and excuse the inevitable crises of the capitalist system. Organizations have evolved control mechanisms that successfully contain dissent and frustration, and are able to accommodate workers' frustrations by giving them controlled opportunities to get back at management by wasting time at work and venting in the blogosphere. At the point of production – in the structure of the working day – workers are given certain freedoms (such as the ability to surf the web or daydream during a team meeting) that give them the impression that they are getting a good deal and lead them to consent to capitalist relations of production. The cyclical curtailment of these freedoms, plus genuine worker motivation to do a good job some of the time, prevents a situation arising where worker idleness would lead to a crisis, either economically or in terms of control. Consent is also generated in the cultural sphere – the

blogosphere itself is part of a vast cultural apparatus that has itself developed under the auspices of the capitalist knowledge economy.

This networked apparatus creates a sense of empowerment without connecting to any kind of organized action. Protest is flattened and operationalized, reduced to humorous characterizations and gags, the critique of the whole is lost amid the myriad banner adverts, graphical wallpapers, and hypertext associations that leap seamlessly from the serious and weighty to the banal. Blogging is patterned on knowledge work itself and represents an introjection of capitalist consciousness, not true rebellion. Those workers who do resist the system are lost and disoriented. There is no cohesive alternative. Beyond the “belongingness” of corporate culture, which has absorbed social and family life, there is an existential and ideological void that leaves rebels alone and confused. They become ambivalent selves, ricocheting back and forth between commitment to the company and a whining rejection of its values. What resistance there is, is highly individualized and shows little or no prospect of leading to class consciousness or radical demands.

3. A New New Class?

The third scenario builds on the work of Alvin Gouldner (1979), Marcuse (1991) in his optimistic mood, and James Scott (1987), being also informed by reflection on the writer-clerk tradition. It positions anonymous workbloggers as members of a new class, which has persisted in spite of the ideological hegemony of corporate culture in recent decades. These workers, by virtue of their exposure – through college education, working class intellectualism, and pop culture – to critical discourse, are predisposed to distrust corporate culturism and to feel violated by its encroachment on their sphere of

autonomy. Further, these workers, being essentially cosmopolitan and often ecological in outlook, fundamentally question the activities of the organizations they work for and the system as a whole.

Just as this class of workers has arisen from the logic of capitalism, the computer networks used by anonymous workbloggers have also arisen dialectically as a side-effect of the globalization of capital and the shift from manufacturing- to information-based economies. In addition, through its origins in hacker subculture, the blogosphere (as an extension of the Internet) has a countercultural logic of its own that is capable of operating outside of the closed logic of the entertainment industry.

In spite of ever-increasing work hours and responsibilities, knowledge workers are able to exploit both the technological tools and the layout of their workplaces to reclaim time for reflection on their situation within the labor process. The network itself provides opportunities for them to connect with other like-minded workers across organizational and national boundaries. They use creative writing to synthesize and draw out the major contradictions in corporate culturism, rather than reducing these operationally to individualized gripes. Through making positive connections to one another in the blogosphere, which in turn link to mainstream media, these employees participate in a diffuse, highly networked critical discourse.

Their lack of interest in traditional labor organization does not preclude their commitment to a Gramscian war of position that may lead ultimately to radical demands and fundamental social change. The system will try to control them, co-opting blogging in the form of corporate-sponsored employee blogging or just by increasing surveillance, but the logic of technological development in a decentralized information-based system

will aid their continual ability to elude control. Anonymous workbloggers represent the tip of the iceberg of a latent new class, whose members are “hiding out” in knowledge workplaces, manipulating the system in order to maximize their free time on the job, and maintaining a permanent distance between their political values and the ideology of the system in which they find it convenient to participate.

Theorizing the Desire for Unfettered Creativity

There is much in anonymous workblogging to recommend that these intriguing workers fit within the functionalist “bad seed” scenario described above. These creative critical responses to the labor process are often oblique, with authors explicitly avoiding programmatic calls to action, or manifestoes for an alternative to corporate capitalism. They enjoy workplace collegiality and are notably ambivalent about alternatives to the status quo. The practice also lends itself to the logic of containment, as described by the second scenario. The workers featured in Chapter Four are all in good standing, and get their work done to the satisfaction of their supervisors and colleagues. Their writings are powerful but their impact is diffuse enough to be non-threatening, especially when managed by periodic clampdowns on workplace freedoms that encourage self-censorship without disrupting employees sense of general wellbeing. Writers are maverick and individualistic enough that they are capable of acting in concert only at isolated moments such as when a blogger is fired. They are averse to attaching their writings to any kind of organized political platform and, as such, their writings have only an ephemeral impact.

However, these interpretations, while not easily dismissed, do not altogether capture the cheeky and subversive spirit of anonymous workbloggers. In the foregoing chapters, this study has emphasized that these workers limit their responsibilities and

make room for the imagination; embody their ideas in a tangible creative form; use networked technology for exchange and dialogue; and dream of what could be, rather than what is. The orientation of the anonymous workbloggers in this dissertation – particularly those analyzed in Chapters Three and Four – is intriguingly continuous with the lives of Kafka, Miller, and their ilk, sharing both the limitations but also the political potency of the writer-clerk tradition. Their disinclination to associate creativity with paying work; their yearning for change and angst over time-scarcity; their sense that the office provides rich anecdotal material for literary commentary on larger issues at stake in contemporary society; their desire to throw up everything and live the life of a struggling artist – all point to a shared artistic sensibility that differs from that of the traditional labor organizer yet has social change potential in terms of changing men’s minds. Bloggers’ writings, while not necessarily of comparable caliber to the works of Kafka or Dickens, nevertheless occupy something of a common space, embodying similar values and feelings about what is not right with the world. Their ability to harness networked technologies and the confluence of their writings with a growing ecological and ethical crisis, suggest the possibility of the third scenario. However, as the following section argues, this radical potential must be balanced against the existential thrill that derives from unfulfilled dreams and ennui.

The reality of dissatisfaction and time-stealing

Today’s anonymous workbloggers – the small number whose writing talent permits a degree of eloquence – are citizens of a sophisticated literary community that reviles the drabness of the office routine and the petty tyranny of superiors. They adhere to a worldview that romanticizes the notion of the sensitive and intelligent being caught up in a nonsensical and oppressive world, and attaches to him significance as a social

actor, waging an inner war against soul-crushing bureaucracy or corporate culture. These white-collar writers do not necessarily call for a return to nature or lay out alternative social programs, but they reveal how individuals detach their dreams from the labor process in which they participate, inviting reflection on what *could be*.

In spite of their ambivalence about alternatives to the current status quo, the anonymous workbloggers in this study express an almost unanimous desire for more unfettered time, and a sense of dissatisfaction with the number of hours that must be devoted to paid labor in order to make a living. Their creative activities are surreptitious attempts to seek self-fulfillment in the interstices of the working day. Their efforts are testimony to the failure of corporate culture, in spite of its lavish promises, to emancipate the knowledge worker within the capitalist labor process.

The networked and decentralized knowledge workplace has made it possible to carve out time during the working day for unfettered reflection and self-expression. The technologies of the cubicle make it possible to transmit the products of this reflection – many of them pointedly critical of the status quo – to a global audience of other knowledge workers. As this study shows, this opportunity has been taken up enthusiastically by employees with considerable creative writing talent. Anonymous workblogs are part of a broader movement, in cubicles and open plan offices across the globe, where web designers and customer service representatives are surreptitiously writing screenplays, inventing false meetings that allow them to take the afternoon off, inventing technical problems that give them time to write college papers, and using computer rear-view mirrors that help them elude detection while they engage in their own creative projects (Schoneboom, 2005).

Research into “humane” work environments where play and socializing on the job is tolerated or rewarded by management have tended to overlook this subversion of the labor process or to treat it as cooperation with a seductive business philosophy that encourages self-direction and a little fun during work hours. Studies of blue-collar work such as Burawoy's *Manufacturing Consent* (1979) or Donald Roy's *Banana Time* (1960) explored the ways in which workers *subversively* reclaimed time for their personal use during working hours. A similar understanding is needed of the ways in which knowledge workers take advantage of the humane workplace to reclaim time colonized by the labor process. Focusing on contemporary knowledge workers' cynical orientation toward the productive goals of the organization, and their active concealment of creative and social pursuits from supervisors, the cultivation of solid emotional and ideological detachment from the company credos becomes readily apparent, and the foreclosure of resistance by corporate culture becomes less certain .

As this study of anonymous workbloggers confirms, many knowledge workers successfully reclaim time from the labor process for creative and critical self-expression while simultaneously inhabiting a “good worker” mentality – meeting deadlines, and maintaining high work standards, as well as playing along with new management doctrine such as “going the extra mile.” This behavior, as indicated by the lives of bloggers, partly signifies a happy compromise that infuses the thrill of concealment into the mundane work day and might be characterized in functionalist terms as embodying overall support for the status quo. However, creative resistance also points to deeply held and skillfully expressed convictions about corporate injustice in terms of the global

environment, bitterness over the long-hours culture that is endemic to the “humane” work environment, and an ongoing tension that may lead ultimately to struggle and conflict.

Time and creative fulfillment

Above all, creative resistance is a politics of time-scarcity. It captures employees who have rejected the idea of creative fulfillment via the capitalist labor process and who do not mind working, but are disgruntled at *how much* they must work, and feel robbed of the opportunity to develop themselves fully in the time left available to them after the working day is done. Throughout Marx’s work, reduced labor time is a central to the emancipation of labor, both as an end in itself and as a means for achieving the overthrow of capital. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, the full and sensual connection to the creative wealth of humanity is made possible by maximizing disposable time for spontaneous self-development. Marx quotes Shulz, insisting that men must “above all, have *time* at their disposal for spiritual creative activity and spiritual enjoyment” (Marx, 2001, p. 73). In *The German Ideology*, Marx writes that once technological advances are oriented to meeting society’s needs rather than profit, time will be freed up for the free development of individualities, making it possible, “to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, and criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.” (Marx & Engels, 2001, p. 53) In the *Grundrisse* the radical displacement of labor is central to the process of emancipation, making possible the maximization of disposable time, “which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific, etc. development of the individuals in the time set free” (Marx, 1993, p. 706).

For Marx, technological advances create the conditions for the overthrow of capital. Tied to profit-creation, technological gains simultaneously displace labor and

lengthen the working day for those who remain in the workforce, denuding human productive activity of its sensual and enriching content. Technology has a “revolutionary” basis (Marx, 1992, p. 617), forcing constant change and creating a mobile and dynamic workforce, who may use technology to oppose capital. Technological innovation thus “ripens both the elements for forming a new society and the forces tending toward the overthrow of the old one” (Marx, 1992, p. 635). Beyond capital, these same labor-saving technologies are available for society’s benefit, creating the “true wealth” of the six-hour working day (Marx, 1993, p. 706).

There have been moments when a reduced working week or self-directed work that follows the creative impulses of the worker seems within reach. Encouraged by both the prospects of automation and the increased negotiating power of labor during the 1970s, E.P. Thompson envisages a shorter work week that would balance work-discipline and unbounded creative or idle time, bringing a new synthesis of old and new work rhythms: “Punctuality in working hours would express respect for one’s fellow workers. And unpurposive passing of time would be behavior which the culture approved” (1993, p. 402). The dotcom revolution created the impression that this kind of technologically enabled liberation was possible within capital. The freewheeling digital workplaces of the early 1990s promoted the notion that self-fulfillment could be tied unproblematically to profit goals. However, as Andrew Ross (2002) has shown, this moment of emancipation was ephemeral. During the boom, dotcom workers were able to transcend their instrumental relation to the apparatus and recover the use of their instruments as tools for the realization of spontaneous, creative goals, in spite of their economic dependence on the multinational corporations that dotcoms served. But this control was usurped as the

economy tightened and the corporate-financial apparatus initiated a cycle of overwork, routinization, and moral degradation that shattered the liberal capitalist dreams of the dotcom movement.

Anonymous workblogs confirm that self-fulfillment has not been realized by today's knowledge workplaces, in spite of the promises of management gurus. However, this workforce is clearly not emiserated in the manner envisaged by Marx. While not in economic need, the bloggers in this study resent the colonization of their time by the capitalist labor process and use the tools of the office for the subversive pursuit of unfettered creative freedom in the interstices of the working day. In one sense their activities embody critical theory's vision of the total administration of work and leisure time, which sustains the reification of consciousness and precludes critical thought. Blogs are patterned on knowledge work itself; resistance is contained within the remove of the blogosphere, and oppositional forces are successfully absorbed while creating a sense of realistic dissidence (Horkheimer, 2001, p. 132).

However, critical theory – in Marcuse's account, at least – also allows for the neutrality of technics wherever time and energy are reclaimed from a cultural apparatus that enforces a mechanics of conformity. Wherever people have unfettered time for reflection (even if this is time stolen from the working day), opposition may be reignited. Repeating Marcuse's words that were quoted earlier in this dissertation, there exists, “a sensitive intelligence sickened by that which is being perpetrated,” and this intelligence emerges wherever people have “free available energy which is not expended in superimposed material and intellectual labor,” wherever they are freed from the “enslaving contentment” of “comfort, business, and job security in a society which

prepares itself for and against nuclear destruction” (1991, pp. 242-243). For Marcuse, technology, which is merely congealed labor power, can be harnessed in the interests of refusal. The technologies perfected by the knowledge economy are also “forces and tendencies exist which may break this containment and explode the society” (1991, p. xlvii) – available for destruction of the status quo, wherever worker are able to subvert the doctrine of self-management and borrow company time for creative acts of resistance that might, in Miller’s words, “upset everything.”

The ecological and ethical mandate for social change

The New Class critique, which affords a revolutionary role for skilled workers further counters the reification thesis and bolsters the notion of emancipation as the special project of employees who have achieved a degree of comfort and privileged access to the inner workings of the system that enables them to look about and question the status quo:

Precisely because it is placed in the centre of the most complex mechanisms of organizational capitalism, the new working class is brought to realize more quickly than the other sectors the contradictions inherent in the system. Precisely because its elementary demands are largely satisfied, the new working class is led to ask itself other questions whose solutions cannot be found in the realm of consumption (Mallet, 1975, p. 29).

Gouldner (1979) sees the new class as a flawed universal class – self-seeking and morally ambivalent but ultimately progressive, cosmopolitan, and ecologically minded. Vehemently opposed to censorship and devoted to a culture of critical discourse, this class is ready to wage a Gramscian war of position against a capitalist system focused on profit for profit’s sake.

The employees profiled in this study – IT professionals like Tim, customer service specialists such as Dan and Beth, and call center operators like Anonymous

Me, are not interested in taking over the productive forces but – as their writings attest – they are not ideologically resigned to the status quo. They want personal time to work on their novels, to write music, and to spend time with their families, but they also desire that their labor should not perpetuate ecological destruction or gross economic injustice. Their writings gently yet powerfully make a case for change. Ambivalent and self-involved, they are not coalescing as a class ready to push for a new era of worker-controlled production. But they are making a contribution in the world of ideas that might give momentum such a movement.

Bloggers' desire for unfettered productive time, coupled with their anti-corporate convictions, harmonizes strongly with Aronowitz and DiFazio's (1995) vision for dignified nonwork as an alternative to growth-based economics. Countering Piore's view that high-tech capitalist production has increased worker independence and resourcefulness, Aronowitz and DiFazio argue that corporate domination continues to be deleterious to human life and the life of the planet. They argue for reduced work hours and regulation of capital, bolstered by international labor solidarity and sustained by guaranteed income, universal healthcare, childcare, enhanced public services, entitlement to higher education, and reverse remuneration for those who do society's most unpleasant or dangerous work. In this context, high-technology would be constantly evaluated and harnessed in the direction of maximizing free-time, quality of community life and ecological sustainability.

The heterogeneous perspectives contained in the progressive workblogs featured in this study cannot be neatly placed within a particular ideology, and their

authors' reluctance to associate their writings with a program for social change cautions against the temptation to draw firm conclusions about the implications of creative resistance. This study has identified talented employee-authors in the blogosphere who are broadly sympathetic with the project of building of a society that is ecologically sustainable and which promotes ideas such as the three-day week. Paying close attention to the polyphonic and irreducible nature of the anonymous workblogging phenomenon, this dissertation has attempted to capture accurately the motivations of these employee-authors, understanding their work in the context of a broader iconoclastic popular culture that imbues their work with larger significance.

Like Dostoevsky's underground man, the bloggers in this study are somewhat repelled by men of action, and for this reason it seems presumptuous to attach their writings to a political action agenda. However, there is an effective form of protest contained in their refusal to work all the time, and the diversion of energy and resources away from capital, particularly when these resources are used to craft anti-corporate diatribes with mass appeal. Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue (1975) argued that workers should demand a three-hour day, asserting their "right to be lazy" and replacing capital's glorification of productivity with the Greek ideal of leisure and feasting. Anonymous workbloggers represent the tip of the iceberg of a latent and radicalized new class who embrace the right to be lazy, whose members are "hiding out" in knowledge workplaces, manipulating the system in order to maximize their free time on the job, and maintaining a permanent distance between their political values and the ideology of the system in which they find it

convenient to participate. Asked about his work ethic, Ignatius J. Reilly, the anti-hero of this dissertation comments “I dust a bit. In addition, I am currently writing a lengthy indictment against our century” (Toole, 1980, p. 6). Anonymous workbloggers enthusiastically indict their workplaces but they do not necessarily have the energy or the motivation to reorganize our factories and offices. However, they have the creative wherewithal to produce eloquent and humorous protests that reveal cracks in the system, contributing to a growing counter-hegemonic bloc that may ultimately use networked technology to shatter the status quo. The job of the labor movement and of the left is to figure out how to harness this progressive and witty class of workers without triggering their – possibly well-founded – aversion to and cynicism about the organized politics and institutions that are needed to make change happen.