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Resistance and purity rituals in organizations

Introduction and theoretical basis

Resistance of employees belongs to the phenomena of everyday life in organizations which induce intense and manifold sense- and meaning-making processes. On the side of management, the dominant way of sense-making regarding resistance of employees is delegitimizing and oppressing resistance (Ackroyd/Thompson 1999). Innumerable examples of brute punishment practices in case of resistance are provided in military and religious organizations. Attempts of workers to limit their productivity, one of numerous resistance acts, are called pejoratively „soldiering” by Frederick W. Taylor. There are rather few attempts, to understand meaning making of workers’ resistance on the side of management. The existing studies focus either on describing and plausibly classifying management strategies of dealing with workers’ resistance (e.g. Bormann 2007) or searching explanations for actions of management in their individual orientations (e.g. Böhm /Lucking 2006). The field of resistance in organizations is dominated by power approaches, mainly informed by Marxism, which consider resistance as well as its dealing in organizations as power struggles between the classes of employers and employees.

In this study, I will draw on the concept of purity rituals by Mary Douglas (1966) in order to explain managerial meaning making regarding worker resistance in organizations. Different from the cognitive oriented models of sense-making and meaning-making, the concept of purity rituals focuses primarily on the (ritualized) behavior or ‘practice’ as a seed for meanings, not so much on discursive mechanisms of meaning creation. The study deals with the question of what kind of explanation this alternative, cultural-anthropologically informed approach can offer for meaning making as well as for dealing with resistance in organizations.

As there are numerous ways of demonstrating (as well as concealing) resistance in organizations, I will focus in this study on one special and institutionalized form of workers’ resistance, namely the workers’ initiation of works councils (Hodson 1995). Several media reports show that the formation of work councils in some cases induces highly oppressive reactions by management, at least in Germany (e.g. Bormann 2007; Schramm-de Robertis 2010). What kind of explanation for this kind of dealing with resistance of workers can be derived from Douglas’ concept of “purity rituals”?

Method

The empirical analysis in this study is based on secondary and primary data sources. Secondary data include previously published documents on work councils being prevented by management, be it press releases, biographical reports or research studies. Original data were selected in form of problem-

centered interviews with employees and management representatives from two different companies where work councils have been prevented.

Results of analysis

From the perspective of M. Douglas, the attempts made by management to prevent the founding of work councils can be considered as purity rituals helping to confirm the dominant social order and to oppress initiatives of employees perceived as dirty. The cases considered make clear that the ways of dealing with this kind of workers resistance highly corresponds with the philosophy of the company. The dominating philosophy (or symbolic regime) in the cases obtained usually entails a clear separation between the omnipotent management on the one side and employees of the organization on the other side. The initiatives of work councils threaten or "contaminate" these regimes as they question the dividing lines of local symbolic systems or even threaten to cancel them. Thus, these initiatives are, in the eyes of management, anomalies of the existing regime, something that "does not fit into an existing order". Workers' resistance is thus considered as an anomaly of employee behavior which must be oppressed. At least three practices of management could be observed here which can be classified as purity rituals according to M. Douglas:

- 1) "Threatening of order offenders" in form of intimidation of employees, especially members of the electoral board by threatening to dismiss them, to impute crimes or by continuously controlling as well as humiliating them;
- 2) "Removal of dirt" by the exclusion of the affected branch offices from the operational information, by transferring employees in another store, by outsourcing and closing "infected" stores;
- 3) "Creating a new reality pattern with new-placing for the dirt" in form of initiation of a second, employer-friendly list of work council candidates.

In face of these observations, the question will also be raised what kind of limitations the concept of purity rituals by M. Douglas involves. Special attention will be given to the issue of the so called 'cultural reductionism' as well as the issue of the appropriateness of the concept of purity rituals which originally refers to symbolic systems of indigenous peoples for the institutionally highly complex contexts of current organizations.

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