Social Identity, Strategy and Change: A Critical Analysis of Organizational Change in a French IT Company

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In the first part of this article, we associated the various types of social identities that form based on work relations with two human resources management models: the Instrumental Model and the Political Model. We plan to show how human resources management practices typical of the political model and the instrumental model relate with the level of autonomy and identity differentiation social actors attain at organizations. In order to analyze these questions, we provide a case study where we show that autonomous social actors accustomed to a political human resources management model have trouble accepting changes that implement more restrictive managerial practices typical of the instrumental model. In such cases, the resistance of social actors may jeopardize consolidation of the organizational change process.

1. The Symbolic Interactionism Paradigm

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, representative authors of Symbolic Interactionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1979; Strauss, 1955; Strauss, 1991) adopt a view of human conduct where values play a leading role. This school regards primary socialization as the basis for construction of the individual identity and the foundation of its decision-making criteria: According to the assumptions of symbolic interactionism, individuals act according to their beliefs. Therefore, for these authors, the basic moment of values interiorization is post-Oedipal childhood, but the interiorization of standards and rules extends throughout the life individuals based on their involvement in new interaction universes. Symbolic Interactionism therefore reconciles the Weberian assumption of human freedom of choice with a second model according to which **the values system precedes all other social systems: the interiorization of standards and the decisions made by social actors are ever governed by preexisting values the individual incorporates during primary socialization.** These assumptions lead to a systemic conception of the action system, where a social system's preexisting values provide individuals not only with objectives but also with the socially legitimate means to achieve them (rules, standards and social roles).

Therefore, according to this line of argument, individuals' beliefs and values set the boundaries of their freedom of action and choice. **Within those boundaries**, however, they are considered theoretically

free to decide on a course of action or to abstain from acting. This applies in particular to actions deemed voluntary, that is, belonging to the real of willing, rather than imposed, relevance. The significance of such actions arises from *"behaving in a certain way and not in another."* Thus, even within the realm of imposed situations, man's actions are not entirely predetermined. Even under the most coercitive of circumstances, one may decide not to comply, as long as willing to accept the consequences of disobedience (Schutz, 1943).

Peter Berger has to say on this:

"For a moment we see ourselves as puppets indeed. Then we grasp a decisive difference between the puppet theater and our own drama. Unlike puppets, we have the possibility of stopping in our movements, looking up and perceiving the machinery by which we have been moved. In this act lies the first step towards freedom" (Berger & Luckmann, 1979:34)

In sum, this view conceptualizes social reality as the fruit of a human construction, through the interaction and negotiation of various social groups that interpret reality according to preexisting criteria, typical of their cultures. By acting, however, individuals influence and transform the very criteria and standards one which their action is based, in a dialectic process of reinterpretation and reconstruction of social reality. Consequently, there is the acknowledgement, however partial, of a certain degree of freedom human beings enjoy in their choices and decision-making criteria. Nevertheless, according to this analytical stream, cultural standards and values have great weight in the decision-making process.

2. Identity, Values and Behavior

Renaud Sainsaulieu, in his model of Identity at Work, unlike Symbolic Interactionism, develops and argument where he regards human action as even less determined by values incorporated during primary socialization.

Based on Simon's works on limited rationality, according to which an individual's rationality or decision-making logic is influences by the individual's present and past, based on what Boudon termed **a position effect** (the decision depends on the social actor's position within a specific action context, determining his or her access to pertinent information) and a **disposition effect** (the decision depends on the deciding individual's mental, cognitive and affective characteristics, which are preformed by past socialization), Sainsaulieu's model shows how a social actor's current decision-making criteria are indeed influenced by past socialization, but also depend heavily on the influences, circumstances and

problems of the "here and now".(Boudon, 1991; Simon, 1955; Simon, 1956; Simon, 1957). Works dealing with limited rationality point out the uncertain and dynamic nature of human behavior.

Festinger's works on cognitive dissonance reinforce the argument for non-determination of human action. In a book published in 1957, Festinger defines the cognitive process as every knowledge, opinion or belief of an individual about himself, his behavior, or the facts relative to a decision context. According to the author, an individual often runs into dissonance or opposition among various cognitions, finding himself at an impasse that causes a sense of psychological "discomfort" that he tries to mitigate by adopting several possible strategies: challenging basic values, adopting new values, or retaining existing values and changing the course of action (Festinger, 1957).

This argument, therefore, questions the principle of the authority of the values system over other social systems, showing through the works of Festinger and other authors that values do not determine behavior, as behavior does not determine values. These two variables are not explained by a linear cause-effect reasoning, but are part of a system. An individual's new behaviors might originate new values, causing him to question older values, or, conversely, further reinforce the latter. In sum, it can be said that these studies, as well as Festinger's theories of cognitive dissonance, may release the individual from that which Wrong called a "hyper-socialized" concept of the human being, which seeks out explanations for current behaviors only in the past of individuals and their landmark socialization experiences (Wrong, 1977).

One might therefore conclude that the capacity for strategic action – the ability to perceive opportunities to act, foresee the consequences and risks of each alternative and take these risks by implementing a decision – varies from one person to another, based on social origins and the cultural medium, and is fundamental to the construction of the individual identity from its interactions in everyday work activities. The capacity for strategic action can be improved and exercised through interactions with other individuals in various settings.

2.1. The Development of Social Identity from Work

Adopting, therefore, the theoretical assumption of the non-determination of human conduct by the values system, as explained above, Sainsaulieu develops his identity model based on the studies of Erikson discussed next.

For Erikson, the feeling of identity is characterized by the

"*perception of one's own unity and temporal continuity. Concerning its subjective aspect, the identity is the individual's perception that similarities exist with one's self and of a continuity in internal synthesis*

procedures relative to the ego; there are also differences from other that characterize one's individual style as a person" (Erikson, 1972).

Based on this view, we can conclude that identity implies two dimensions:

a) ***"sameness"*** - the dimension of permanence - where the ego retains some basic characteristics during the biological and historical process an individual experiences in the course of life.

b) **coherence** - In light of the social process and the biological process that involve the individual, the ego's task is to provide a synthesis, an organizing principle according to which a human being remains as a coherent personality whose individuality is perceived by others, despite the changes it experiences. Therefore, the Sainsaulieu's model uses the concept of identity to express the feeling of permanence and continuity that an individual experiences in his social relations and that he loses in the presence of extreme pressures. As regards everyday life, the concept of identity refers to the individual's effort to produce a synthesis of his action, balancing the internal and external forces that drive this action, which is fruit of the inter-relation between his inner reality and the outer reality of the social group's construction.

2.2 The Importance of Conflict and Social Acknowledgement to the Construction of Identity

According to Sainsaulieu, one of the fundamental elements to the construction of individual identity is the acknowledgement of others, which occurs dynamically based on one's social interactions "here and now." Christophe Dejours reinforces the importance of acknowledgement of the social group for the formation of identity, writing that

"in the subjective world, the meaning assigned to work depends on identity and participation games: what the individual expects from his work is also a moral retribution: acknowledgement"

Dejours points out the importance of the **acknowledgement of utility** (social, economic and technical utility of individual and collective contributions to the organization) and the **judgment of beauty** (ethic, aesthetic validity), both conferred by the hierarchy, the peers or the social group, and with a bearing on the perception individuals develop of the social worth of their work and on the concept they develop of themselves (Dejours, 1993).

Sainsaulieu shows how one of the driving forces of the evolution of individual personality and of the struggle for social acknowledgement is the experience of conflict in human interactions. It is based on the experience of social conflict that the social system interacts with the individual system of personality, that these two spheres meet. The concept of identity designates the aspect of the subject's personality system that constantly reacts to the social system's structure. The identity expressed this pursuit of strength and resources to allow social expression of individual will, that is, the subject

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permanently pursues the possibility of others acknowledging the fact that his is the bearer of an individual and autonomous will. The concept of identity, therefore, designates the struggle for permanence of social means of acknowledgement of the self and for the subject's ability to assign meaning to his experience.

Bergamini & Coda, on addressing leadership, show how identification with a leader and with the meaning he assigns to action causes individuals to adopt certain standards of conduct. The author shows how leadership is a social reality construction process based on power (Bergamini & Coda, 1997). Sainsaulieu develops a similar argument. Other authors have recently produced research reinforcing these arguments (Stuart, Ashforth, Dutton, 2000).

2.3 Sainsaulieu's Model of the Construction of Identity at Work and a Review of Hegel and of the Acknowledgement of the Self in the Social World

Sainsaulieu uses the works of Hegel as basis for his model. Analyzing Hegelian philosophy, the author highlights the interdependence of the cognitive (world comprehension, access to rationality) and affective (the interplay of relationships among wills) aspects. An individual cannot complete the process of attaining "world comprehension" that Hegel discusses and the development of the ability to reason if he is not acknowledged in his affective relations as am autonomous bearer of a will. A parallel dialectics that involves the level of will on the one hand and the level fo reason on the other therefore constitutes a complete individual.

The struggle among wills of different individuals involves a social relationship whose subject is the acknowledgement of the self by others. It is by coming out victor in this struggle that the human being can secure acknowledgement of his individuality. The human being's identity is not, thus, the starting point from which the social world is constructed, but, rather, a dynamic concept, the outcome of the interplay of relationships involved in struggle and conflict experiences that take place at all time.

As a result, a central point in Hegelian philosophy lies in showing how an individual's conflict experiences will later have important consequences for his identity and "world view," that is, for the formation of his reasoning as an actor, of his decision-making criteria. The beginning of the dialectic relationship that leads to acknowledgement of the individual by others (i.e., to differentiation) is marked by the will to appropriate the object. IN the course of the process of expressing will and appropriating the object, the subject inevitably encounters, insofar as he lives in a society, another individual with a concurrent will regarding the same object. And this clash of wills gives rise to the "master-slave" dialectics, which will impart self-awareness to the individual through the

acknowledgement of others. **He will the acknowledge himself based on the social judgment of his worth.** The worth an individual assigns himself depends, then, on the social measure of his worth.

In Hegelian terms, we can say that what enables an individual to sustain his will for something **is the concrete possibility of victory in light of the surrounding power relationships.** The individual must have minimal social conditions to face the struggle and come out victor at least a few times in order to be able to withdraw from the constant chain of identification with the powerful and affirm his own individuality and finally differentiating.

A consequence of uneven access to resources and power in relationships among adults, particularly in the workplace, is that several individuals cannot impose their difference on others, experiencing conflict firsthand and obtaining at least partial victories. Some privileged individuals have access to concrete means to impose their difference, making others accept their ideas and mediation and imposing their meanings and thinking. "Symbolic death," that is, the inability to reflect and create on one's own, to assign meaning to objects and to experience, may cause mental confusion, anomy and loss of identity.[i]

According to this paradigm, access to the identity is the result of a joint process of identification and differentiation that is expressed in inter-subjective relationships at two levels:

- the level of the identifying affective relationship that involves no conflict;

- 	The political level of social power game, where the individual detaches himself from the first level to impose his difference.

One may then hypothesize that if a child's identity and will are strongly connected with the history of successive identifications, an adult's identity likewise depends **on the social means he has available to sustain his difference through conflicts** and therefore **exit the chain of identifications** (Sainsaulieu, 1977).

The power struggle is therefore not an end in and of itself, but a sign of a deeper game that involves the personality within a social relationship that extends over time and space (Vasconcelos, I, 1997).

To conclude, we can say that everyday work relationships provide a space where the individual can exercise in the path of his pursuit of understanding, in the constitution of a unique rationality. But because the means to obtain acknowledgement from others are unevenly distributed, the chances individuals have of differentiating and affirming a unique rationality vary.

2.4. The Various "Paths" to Experience and Identity at Work

The subject is the bearer of a cultural past, of habits acquired through identification processes typical of primary and secondary socialization, but the social universe of work, where he chances the "here and now," may stand for him as a completely different reality from his past. The danger of the present makes him confront the perception, analysis and judgment characteristics he developed in the past with the aptitudes needed for survival in the present situation. Earlier values, adapted to his past reality, may no longer assure success in present-day relationships, and learning new strategic capabilities through work relations may cause him to become aware of other reasoning for action and realities that do not correspond with his own reasoning or socialization medium. The intellectual, affective and cognitive resources he may have developed in the past, his values and worldview, may no longer suffice to help him understand, decide and act in the current setting.

Confrontation with one's own values and baseline characteristics will be the stronger the more oppressed the individual feels by the new reality and the more he tries to understand it. He will then review his reasoning for action and seek out a new worldview that integrates past experiences but also explains the new perceptions and sensations, enabling him to find new means of action.

Therefore, the ability to analyze various options and risks in interpersonal and collective relationships (that is, each individual's strategic capacity) is the fruit of concrete learning from work relations. At least as far as learning by heuristics and experimentation, the work scheme has an uneven influence on the development of individuals' cognitive and analytical skills, as some have the opportunity to experiment a subtly relational game, while others have their socio-political development opportunities constrained. Regardless of their individual histories and past, social actors spend a lot of time at the workplace. The fact that they experience the same working conditions and the same spaces for interaction, as well as access to and control of the same kinds of resources, offers individuals similar paths to identity and understanding.

According to some of the socio-technical school's assumptions, the author proposes four models based on his research. Each mode reflects certain and distinct types of actor reasoning and decision-making criteria. This is not about describing four kinds of "collective personality," but rather different processes of identity structuring and access to Identity at Work. Therefore, social actors subject to the same working conditions for a certain time tend to develop similar differentiation strategies and modes, also sharing common values and a rationality typical of the relevant organizational group.

2.4.1   The Strategic Withdrawal Model

Individuals who renounce the struggle for success and acknowledgement in the workplace. They attempt to carry out their tasks at the minimum standard level and become as little involved with work as possible. They try to become involved in other sectors of life – family, clubs, associations – and limit professional action to the strict minimum needed. This group is characterized by very weak inter-peer horizontal identification relationships. But they tend to identify strongly with the figure of the boss. The authority relationship is not only accepted, but demanded. This group was made up of foreign laborers, Africans in particular, and female laborers. The group was characterized by apathy and the absence of individual or collective mobilization. For these individuals, identification with this or that boss is the only way to affirm difference from other co-workers. The have few possibilities to develop their political aspect and ability for strategic action, as they avoid conflict relationships and renounce in advance any attempt to make their ideas and opinions "stand," remaining as prisoners of vertical identification processes and, as a result, enjoying little autonomy.

2.4.2.   The Democratic Solidarity Model

Unlike the "Strategic Withdrawal" group, the author's research identified two groups that refuse vertical identifications, becoming little involved with bosses and superiors, but developing a rather strong inter-peer corporate solidarity. These are skilled laborers, professionals, and executives and directors. In these two groups, laborers with particular skills or techniques are satisfied with the control they exert over their subordinates, the less skilled laborers, and executives and managers are satisfied with the control they exert over their subordinates. Skilled laborers of the same profession are usually corporate "companions" and share values typical of that profession. On the other hand, the members of the managers and directors group are also capable of maintaining differentiated interpersonal relationships at the affective and cognitive levels, releasing themselves from horizontal relationships and becoming capable of defending their own opinion or point of view before colleagues, refusing the authority they supposedly hold over them. These groups therefore, are capable of exercising power and have good capacity for strategic action. These social actors are autonomous and capable of experiencing affinity relationships among co-workers, but negotiating, debating and discussing their differences as needed.

In between the two extreme situations described above – one group that develops an evasive, apathetic strategy that involves refusal of conflict and inability to handle situations that involve power, and another that is familiar with power or authority positions and capable of autonomy and differentiation – the author finds two other action strategies.

2.4.3. The Unanimity Model

Two group align with this model: laborers employed in assembly lines, with no particular specialization and dedicated to repetitive and mechanical labor done together with co-workers, live a professional experience of horizontal identification with peers and vertical identification with leaders of the workers' social system, thereby finding means to affirm their difference as a group from managers and bosses. Each individual therefore feels strongly connected with the group through which differentiation is achieved. This model of laborer merger involves identification of the group with a group leader that interprets events, defends positions and drives relationships with superiors, proposing mobilizations as needed. This kind of group normally adopts "all or nothing" strategies, achieving strong mobilizations to attain objectives.

The other group with a similar strategy based on unanimity is made up of bureaucrats and administrative employees who avoid strong conflict with co-workers in order to abide by the bureaucratic code of forma equality under the system. This is a means of keeping favoritism in check, avoiding close friendships or identification with superiors. But research shows that where formal bureaucratic equality is jeopardized by reforms, or if the rules that assure their rights change, these individuals, who would normally avoid conflict, are capable of strong mobilization to defend the means that assure their position within the system. The group's political action is erratic, given its limited strategic capacity, similar to the aforementioned laborers group – the group wields a lot of force to achieve minor victories and has trouble with negotiation and political debate.

2.4.4. The Selective Affinities Model

Groups that enjoy greater mobility within the organization – young executives and Trainees, consultants – given the fact that they are constantly changing locations, expect to rise quickly through successive promotions, develop individual action strategies, identifying temporarily with colleagues and superiors, and reconstituting relationships and identifications as soon as they attain new positions within the organization. These individuals are not keen to become politically involved with groups, as they plan to maintain their individual mobility and retain freedom of action from the impositions and constraints that collective action involves. These individuals are usually equipped with good strategic, relational and political capacity. Their refusal to operate as a group, however, prevents them from developing the cognitive and relational skills typical of such action.

We can see that the organization, by providing different paths to experience, autonomy and capacity for strategic action, presents individuals with uneven means of identity affirmation. When an individual lacks means to measure the results of his relationships and his social worth, as he has practically no access to acknowledgement because of his activity type, the will focuses on the pure imaginary and the individual, bound to identification with the powerful, replicates the thinking of those that are capable of defending and imposing their ideas. Where the means to be acknowledged as the author of a concrete action can only be accessed through collective action, because any one individual is too weak to prevail on his own, a merger of wills, accomplished through a process of reciprocal inter-peer projective identification, is reinforced. Where, finally, the individual has the means to obtain acknowledgement of his actions by others, such an individual can reconcile will, reflection and action, proposing a unique and autonomous rationality. Therefore, full exercise of democracy and citizenship is a luxury reserved to the few that are able to differentiate themselves within the organizational system. Development of individual cognitive and political capacity is an important factor in the identity differentiation process.

3. Human Resources Management Policies and Social Identity

We can relate the many types of social identity to prevalent human resources management practices at organizations. Some human resources management (HRM) models propose political and cognitive development of social actors within the organization and incorporate the dimensions of conflict and debate, fostering the emergence of identities of the "democratic solidarity" and "selective affinity" types described earlier. Other models propose opposite practices that, by reducing the autonomy of organizational actors, constrain their cognitive development and politicization. We introduce, next, two typologies that will sustain the analysis of our case study, the Instrumental Human Resources Management Model and the Political Human Resources Management Model. These models were surveyed in a comprehensive study of organizations in the United States and France in the 1990s, by researchers of the Centre d'Etudes et de Formation Approfondie em Gestion (CEFAG). The survey, coordinated by Julienne Brabet of the University of Montpellier, was divided into two parts: firstly, it made a critical assessment of human resources practices in place in over 50 organizations, and analyzed the discourse of HR managers. This led to two typologies that apparently drove the action of practitioners and business practices at the time. Subsequently, it analyzed a significant number of French and Anglo-Saxon human resources manuals that confirmed the typology identified based on managerial practices and interviews. It was, therefore, a census of the practices and learning models through which organizations and individuals represent their experience.

3.1. The Instrumental Model

Organizations, practitioners and administration literature whose analyses are based on this model propose a theoretical body made up of the following concepts:

- The market imposes itself on the firm, which is seen as a rational production instrument and whose strategy is defined by its directors based on pressures from the market, from the industry and from organizational values.

- The purpose of Human Resources Management is to implement this strategy in such a way as to maximize economic results and achieve better employee performance, as the entire organizational community will theoretically benefit from increased productivity.

- Productivity-based compensation and the "*equal opportunities*" value are important features of this model. It is based on the concept of economic efficiency and the argument that social efficiency leads to economic efficiency and *vice versa*.

- Individuals should have greater autonomy, but only insofar as this development is useful to the firm. As a result, employees are regarded as utilitarian beings, conditionally through actions based on the stimulus-response concept, through a unique and often simplified interpretation of behavioral techniques. Under this model, Human Resources practitioners understand that it is possible to implement programs based on these concepts, leading individuals to adopt the expected behaviors, measuring the responses to the stimuli provided and comparing these responses to the productive outcome and the investments made in the program. It concerns itself not with social actors, but social agents.

The role of Human Resources Management is, thus, as follows:

- To assess the needs and resources of organizational groups,

- To describe jobs and provide for them according to a systematic census of candidates, through "objective" selection procedures;

- To assess employees' positions and performances, providing equitable compensation as motivation;

- To train individuals, improve working conditions, inform, communicate and assure satisfactory social relations.

The participation of organizational groups is seen as important as a means to secure their adhesion to the firm's strategy.

Other noteworthy characteristics are:

- The firm is regarded as an adaptative organism;

- The "natural" environment is seen as a reality datum;

- Human resources strategic planning, selection and management are coordinated by HR practitioners;

- Conditionable social actors ("agents"). A utilitarian strategy determined based on pressures from the market and the industry and on the values of top managers;

- Assumed converging interests of the organizational community. The organization follows an ideal model based on social harmony and the development of an "optimal" strategy to attain its contingent economic objectives.

In addition to these characteristics, organizational change is seen as the fruit of structured decisions made by a central top management that is assumed to have all teh information needed about industry pressures and the competitive framework; the power to make policy and select the best means of action in light of the organization's problems. Chains is usually imposed top-down (Brabet, 1993).

3. 2 The Political Human Resources Management Model

The political human resources management model was created based on Herzberg's motivation studies and the studies of the Tavistock Institute of London that laid the foundation for the "Industrial Democracy" movement that arose in Scandinavian countries in the 1960s. Programs such as improved working conditions, the humanization of work and the structuring of tasks (enrichment and expansion), as well as the creation of semi-autonomous production groups are some of the movements these theories have inspired (Herzberg, 1959; Herzberg, 1966). Political debate and self-organization were values the movement defended.

The model stands apart from the instrumental model due mostly to the incorporation of the idea of conflict and dissent in light of the different interests of organizational actors. Several valid actor reasonings and action criteria are acknowledged, given Simon's model of limited rationality, according to which every rationality is related to the deciding social actor, and no unquestionable, absolute rationality exists. Although conflicts within the organization are acknowledged, managers attempt to overcome them through negotiation, achieving cohesiveness among the parties involved in the decision-making process. Under this model, a good manager is an arbitrator whose goal is to achieve cohesiveness by integrating the singular interests of the various groups of social actors to reach a negotiated solution before the firm's management, resulting in a kind of *"political pact*."

The firm's Human Resources policies are regarded as mutating and contingent, standing as temporary solutions typical of specific situations based on an organizational diagnosis. Despite this, HR professionals expect to organize HRM based on an ideal model to be achieved in the long run, involving the qualitative development of the workforce, autonomy and democratic relationships. Some examples of such proposals can be found in the Beer, Wakon and al. manual describing the Harvard Business School course, or the Weiss manual with a chapter by Morin (Beer, M., & Wakon, R., Spector, R., Laurance, P., Milis, P.,, 1985; Weiss, D., 1988).

Main Characteristics of the Political Model:

- Negotiated economic efficiency, which does not necessarily mean short-term social efficiency (acceptance of conflicts, while attempting to absorb them through political negotiation);

- Negotiated and constructed environment;

- Results assessed by organizational groups involved in the decision-making process;

- The key Human Resources actor is the firm's top management;

- Firm is built socially through the political action of the various organizational groups;

- Rational and ethical decisions in connection with conflict resolution, obtaining consensus and power issues.

- Individuals are regarded as valid political actors with a potential for positive development and who actively try to achieve their own interests ("organization citizenship"); ethical model applied to the organization. (Vasconcelos & Vasconcelos, 2001)

This model perceives organizational change as a response to an environment that is negotiated and structured by the industry's organizations, which actively influence the course of events and the Industry's characteristic facts. Individuals are perceived as actors that that part in and influence this change at their various levels of action. These actors are considered to naturally enjoy room for maneuver at their organizational levels and, as a result, negotiation is deemed necessary to the proper implementation of the strategy. The organization is the stage for a strategic game among social actors with greater or lesser ability to act within this political arena. Change, implementing contingent and temporary solutions, aims to accomplish long-term objectives such as an increasingly qualified workforce, the development of skills and competences, and the democratization of relationships at work. The firm's economic development should benefit not only its shareholders, but also society in general and organizational groups. This model is connected with the concept of progress and the construction of social harmony in the long run, in spite of conflicts and dissent.

The above concepts will be used in the analysis of our case study. We attempt to integrate the formative processes of Identity at Work with the two human resources management models surveyed in the study discussed earlier. We can therefore determine how human resources practices favor the emergence of various forms of social identity by structuring work relations. Our case study will illustrate the fact that autonomous social actors accustomed to human resources practices focused on the political model have trouble adapting to changes intended to limit their autonomy and constrain their freedom of negotiation and participation in organizational decisions. This sort of change is regarded as a step back and often engenders resistance reactions, as we will show.

4. Research Methodology

This research is based on an ethnographic study done by means of participative observation at the organization in question over a period of one year, during which 52 individuals gave semi-directed interviews that lasted 90 minutes on average. Members of the main organizational groups described in the case and involved in the conflict were interviewed proportionally. The interviews were not recorded. We also analyzed corporate documents in order to complement the information gathered through participative observation and interviews.

The method used to gather data was the Grounded Theory (also known as Continuous Comparative Analysis) developed by American sociologist Anselm Strauss and adapted to ethnographic qualitative

studies. Strauss gave the method this name because, on producing a theory, researchers reformulate their hypotheses and conclusions as they review and update their research materials, making a continuous comparison among analytical categories. Researchers keep a research log where they record pertinent information divided into categories, constantly comparing the facts observed. Researchers progressively build a theory to explain all of the facts observed until the end of the fieldwork. In this method, no hypotheses exist before data gathering. Researchers begin their field research with a research topic and a few assumptions and ideas, but no closed hypotheses. The theory is built progressively as new factors are observed and as researchers develop their research logs (Strauss, 1955; Strauss, 1991).

The method of Continuous Comparative Analysis applies to several kinds of qualitative analyses, including participative observation, interviews, documentary analysis, and others. The analysis takes account of all the elements capable of contributing to understanding the organization's symbolic universe and the interactions among social actors. Strauss describes four stages for this method: Comparing the facts relative to each category, integrating categories and their properties, outlining the theory, and writing the theory.

This method understands that the outside observer must try to identify the forms of expression that characterize each group's worldview. To this end, the researcher must observe:

- The practice of collective rites;

- The perpetuation of organizational myths or stories, particularly about those in power;

- The presence of taboos;

- The behavior standards and how each group reacts to them;

- The values and ethics that drive the concrete action of the various groups, values that are often opposite to the officially disseminated ones;

- Official communications and the symbols associated with them.

Linda Smircich discusses this kind of research and points out that the knowledge generated with this method can be categorized as *"subjective knowledge."* In such methods, positive the defining trait of positive science, that is, subject/object relationships, is replaced with subject/subject relationships where the researcher focuses on intersubjectively shared meanings. The method assumes that knowledge is researcher-dependent. In fact, the researcher apprehends the meanings of the group's actions through his interaction with the members of the organization, thereby acquiring a global view of the meanings and images the organizational group's members share. It is important to note that a

case study offers significant information and allows expanding or refuting a theory, but, because it does not adopt statistical techniques, no generic statements can be made (Smircich,1983a; Smircich, 1983b). The Continuous Comparative Analysis methodology aligns with the assumptions of the interpretative paradigm as defined by Burell & Morgan, under the Weberian sociological tradition. This method is compatible with theoretical schools such as Symbolic Interactionism and cultural and ethnographic studies that follow a phenomenological research tradition (Burrel & Morgan, 1994).

5. Case Study

This firm, a French state-owned IT company, was established in 1968 based on a strategic decision made by General De Gaulle and expressed in the *"Plan Calcul."* As the leader of the French resistance during World War II, the French president planned to assure, in his administration, that the country was militarily and technologically independent in order to protect it from new international conflicts. As the American government at the time did not accept selling the French the IT know-how needed for the country's nuclear development, the French government decided to invest in the sector. This firm, dedicated for years to the development of proprietary systems to provide the French State with technological support, received ample subsidies and did not have to post profits, an unprecedented fact in the IT industry, where most firms are privately-owned.

In the early 1990s, however, significant changes occurred in the IT industry: technological breakthroughs and a progressive replacement of proprietary systems with open UNIX systems. Because proprietary systems were not interchangeable, they built customer loyalty and created a market reserve. Once a client firm made an investment and purchased proprietary systems from this or other IT firms, it was forced to hire the maintenance services of the selected vender for many years. This was a great source of income for the many firms in the IT industry, who could therefore afford large research and development structures and add value to their brands. The market revolved around supply and customers could not easily switch vendors. A technical, R&D-oriented mindset prevailed in the industry. With the advent of exchangeable UNIX systems, customers were able to migrate from one system to another, and therefore switch vendors. Competition increased and prices dropped. In addition to the advent of UNIX systems, large systems were gradually replaced with small- and medium-sized ones. These changes led to a market restructuring on the side of demand, that is, the customer's needs became more important and the market started to replace the old system that was mainly oriented towards new products development. Faced with small profit margins, firms had to cut costs and increase production volumes.

Because of the crisis the firm at hand, which had been in the red for years, posted net losses of five billion French Francs (one billion US Dollars) in 1993.

The French government, faced with such results, appointed an interventor to privatize the company. The interventor endeavored to restructure the firm in two years, until 1995 that is, so that it could be privatized.

Until the early 1990s, pre-crisis, the firm had a political human resources system based on negotiation arbitrated by management, characterizing a loosely coupled system formed by various highly autonomous heterogeneous groups where cultural diversity prevailed**.**

The organizational groups were as follows:

a) "old professionals," software engineers who had been with the organization for at least 15 years and who had created its proprietary systems, the products responsible for most of the company's revenues. These engineers were strongly attached to the institution and to the technology they had developed. They were used to working by maximizing the technical quality of the product with no concern for costs.

They had a production-oriented mindset. It was a typical research and development view explained largely by the organizational structure, which was organic and aimed at promoting technological development and innovation.

b) new professionals, young recently hired engineers that specialized in UNIX interchangeable systems and saw organizational change and the implementation of a new technology as an opportunity for promotions and professional advance.

c) "administrators" (individuals employed in marketing, finance, quality departments). They normally supported product development by *"old professionals"* and *"new professionals."*

Despite the prevalent technical mindset and the concentration of power in the hands of *"old professionals,"* there was *"room for everyone"* at the organization and the groups negotiated solutions to their specific problems.

With the crisis and the appointment of an interventor, the new management decided to modernize the firm at a brisk pace, implementing as more market-oriented reasoning in anticipation of privatization. Administrators and marketing professionals saw this change as an opportunity for professional advance, as the old system blocked their access to higher hierarchical levels, for which technical knowledge was a requirement.

The Interventor started implementing a series of unilaterally defined changes and reforms. Used to being involved in the firm's strategic planning, the *"old professionals"* tried to get access to

information and become party to decision-making processes, but were systematically kept at bay. Their attempts to negotiate and gain access to the interventor were rejected. This groups started resisting the changes.

In 1995, the company was supposed to renew its ISO 9001 certification and certify a new software unit. The ISO 9001 certification required each department and each unit to write down its work procedures in detail, according to the principle of total technical transparency and workforce exchange. The concept that underlies the ISO 9001 quality standard is that if work is described as simplified standard procedures, the firm will be less dependent on each specialist's know-how, as the tasks involved can be standardized and more easily transmitted to other workers. One goal was to formalize technical knowledge so that specialists could be replaced if the need arose and so that the company would become less dependent on individual knowledge.

The top management's actions, including the ISO 9000 certification, were intended to implement the new UNIX technology, which was to finally supersede the old proprietary systems. The resources generated by proprietary systems were thereby transferred to implementation of the UNIX technology, benefiting the *"new professionals"* in detriment of the *"old professionals."* The *"old professionals,"* feeling threatened by the changes and prevented from negotiating with the management, began more openly expressing their discontent, trying to recover some control over the events.

5.1. Resistance to the ISO 9001 Program

Seeing its attempts to participate refused, this group decided to mobilize, drawing attention to its problems and showing their political importance within the system. Thus, they attempted to sabotage the ISO 9001 program. In December 1995, the group announced that it would not write down its working procedures and routines as required by ISO 9001. They understood that they were already losing control over their work, given the changes that were being implemented, and were not willing to see their autonomy further reduced by standardization. According to them, the ISO 9001 standard was well suited to a hardware production facility with completely standard procedures, but did not match well with a software development laboratory. "*One cannot describe and standardize the creative process*," the group claimed.

Faced with the "old professionals'" unwillingness to collaborate, quality department members had to quickly write down the relevant procedures and routines in order to provide outside auditors with a coherent program, prepared based on a minimally acceptable system. They As a result, due to the resistance of the *"old professionals,"* there was a risk of losing the ISO 9001 certification, which was

to be audited by official certification authority AFAQ - Association Française d'Assurance Qualité, in February, 1996. At the last moment, the quality department of the "Enterprise Systems" business unit was able to "save" the audit process and secure ISO 9001 certification, despite the *"old professionals"'* refusal.

5.2. Reasons that Made Organizational Resistance Possible

According to the interviews, the *"old professionals"* could "afford" to openly challenge the quality department's program because of several factors:

a)   The group knew that its activities, although on the brink of extinction, would still be crucial to the organization for some years in order to assure the technology transition period, as:

- The systems still had to be maintained at the customers' facilities for ten years**;**

- The company still needed the *"old professionals"'* specialized know-how to organize the migration from proprietary systems to UNIX, developing mixed systems;

b) The group's ostensive resistance to the ISO 9001 program was also possible because the program was implemented by inferior administrative staff: the quality department. Had the program been implemented directly by the top management, resistance to it might bring about immediate retaliation.

Even so, according to the interviewees, resistance to the program was also a message to top management: *"we still exist as a group;" "we still have considerable power to act."* They hoped to force the top management to review its strategic plan, or at least start negotiating with the group. The consequences of this resistance movement were quick to follow: faced with the open challenge of *"old professionals,"* instead of negotiating, the management announced a new restructuring in May, 1996: the unit where *old professionals* were deployed, "*Proprietary Systems*," a tension focus, would be terminated and merged with the *"Open Systems"* unit. In the new unit, *"old professionals"* would work together with the *"new professionals"* under the lead of an experienced executive recruited abroad.

According to the interviews, faced with an uncompromising top management, this group saw itself in a dead-end and forced to choose between two bad alternatives:

- Resist openly and risk losing their jobs and suffering retaliations, as negotiations were closed.

- Collaborate with an organizational change plan that would, in the medium run, mean the disappearance of their profession and, consequently, their exit from the organization;

Under such circumstances, they turned to the present and chose the tactic of surviving as they could from one day to the next and resisting change. In every project or activity they became involved with there were always technical ambiguities that a professional could use to justify a mistake or a failure, using valid reasons to legitimize what was in fact the result of an organized policy of stepping on the brakes. This policy was implemented more by omission – steps not taken to prevent or correct a given problem – than by actions that might render those responsible liable. A state of *war* thus set in, hampering the privatization.

It is important to point out, still, that each group of social actors, from its own acting perspective, was justified in their attitudes. The assumption of limited rationality applies to this analysis: depending on their position and specific interests, social actors defend equally valid acting reasonings and peculiar rationalities. This analysis attempts to understand each group's position without bias.

The table next helps visualize the different positions the social actors adopted:

Organizational group	Alleged reasons	Position taken
Interventor and "administrators"	Reduced costs in light of losses, the need to gain competitiveness, privatization to preserve French taxpayers. The Interventor wanted political affirmation; "administrators tried to gain power and mobility in the new structure.	Implementation of Instrumental Human Resources in place of the former Political system. Organizational change unilaterally decided and implemented by top management. Information centralization.
"New professionals"	Upholding the new technology, perceived as more advanced and efficient. Supported privatization and the firm's alignment with the market because this created new promotion and career	Unbridled support to Implementation of the new UNIX technology they specialized in, even if this implied replacement of the Political with the Instrumental

	opportunities for them.	system and the loss of autonomy.
"Old professionals"	Upholding the old proprietary technology and its technical validity, condemnation of privatization, defense of the political human resources system. Old technology was the fruit of their power and control over the organization's resources.	Open resistance to the ISO 9001 program and to privatization. Resistance to Instrumental Human Resources Management, which constrained their autonomy.

6. Case Study Analysis

a) The organization's "Political" Human Resources Management Model and the consolidation of the "Democratic Solidarity" model.

For years on end, while it was a state-owned company dedicated to develop IT technology to support France's nuclear technology, with no profits required, the firm applied the political human resources management model. Organizational groups – administrators, bureaucrats, technicians, *"old professional"* software engineers – negotiated the solutions and strategies to be implemented, debating and arriving at a consensus. The company was, therefore, a *loosely coupled system,* with great cultural diversity from one group to another. During all those years, several groups developed their political capabilities, autonomy and capacity for strategic action, as they were embedded in a more political system that "exercised" them and forced them to develop argumentation and negotiation skills.

The prevalent identity models in the system were closest to the "*Democratic Solidarity*" model described in the first section of this article: it was an organic system where decisions were negotiated my means of mutual adjustment mechanisms. Such systems favor individuals' ability to maintain differentiated interpersonal relationships at the affective and cognitive levels, free from horizontal identification, and capable of defending one's own opinion of point of view before coworkers and refusing any authority that may try to impose itself on them. They are more skilled at spotting various alternatives for action and at acting strategically.

In this particular case, the political human resources management model could consolidate itself because the organization was atypical: for many years, the top management's concern was of a substantive nature – to develop the best Information Technology for the country, regardless of the cost or means to achieve this goal. But because of the losses posted after 30 years in operation, priorities changed: the country already had advanced technology and the market prevailed. The firm's management became more instrumental and the company now had to display good financial results and economic efficiency. The political human resources model, an organic model that allowed clarifying ideas and pursuing advanced and innovative technical solutions, was replaced with the instrumental model, more attuned to the new times and to the firm's need to adjust itself to the market.

b) Implementation of an Instrumental Human Resources Model, leading to Organizational Resistance.

The beginning of the firm's privatization process, in light of losses suffered, and the appointment of a centralizing interventor cause organization resistance phenomena from the part of the *"old professionals"* group.

For years, the *"old professionals"* held control over the organization's pertinent resources, that is, the proprietary technology that was the firm's main product and on which the firm's survival depended. As skilled technicians that had the most know-how about the business, they were considered indispensable. Consequently, they had an active voice in the policies and strategies the organization adopted. They negotiated with other groups through a Political Human Resources Management that favored an autonomous identity model of the *"Democratic Solidary"* type, based on the development and appreciation of specific technical skills.

Given the crisis in the industry and the inception of UNIX systems, the *"old owners"* quickly lost their source of power – mastery of the proprietary technology –, which was no longer regarded as a strategic resource for the organization, even though it would still have need of the specialists for a number of years. The interventor, embodying this new sate of affairs, began making unilateral decisions about the company's technological and strategic change, excluding the *"old professionals"* from the decision-making process. He expected this to avoid time-consuming discussions in the decision-making process, pursuing efficiency and expediting changes so that the company might be quickly privatized.

Replacing the former Human Resources director, the new management established restrictive forms of social regulation more closely associated with the instrumental human resources management model. Systems of this kind usually establish management practices attuned to strict exercise of bureaucratic

authority, direct oversight and control. A more mechanical system substitutes the organic one. Decisions are implemented *"top-down"* with little room for negotiation and more centralized information. The Instrumental system limits access to social acknowledgement, to autonomy and to differentiation, encouraging the consolidation of identity models such as the "Unanimity" and "Strategic Withdrawal" models described earlier. Sainsaulieu's studies show that, constrained in their ability to express themselves and in their autonomy, organizational groups, after some time interacting under such a system, become involved in vertical identification processes with their superiors and the powerful, become more amenable to the prevalent ideology and lose their ability to question and debate.

In this case, we can understand the *"old professionals"'* resistance to the reduction of their autonomy. As seen in the first section of this article, the identity expresses this pursuit of resources to enable expression of individual will before society, that is, the subject permanently looks for the possibility of getting others to acknowledge the fact that he is the bearer of an individual and autonomous will. The concept of identity therefore designates the struggle for the permanence of social means for the acknowledgement of the self and of the subject's ability to assign meaning to his experience.

For many years, technical knowledge based on the old technology was the means the group of *"old professionals"* had found to differentiate and affirm a victorious, autonomous identity. This was the professional reasoning or *"métiers,"* typical of the *"democratic solidarity"* model. The perception these professionals had of their social with was for a long time tied to the acknowledgment of their technical expertise, to the judgment of utility proffered by peers that Dejours speaks of. Suddenly, the worth of this knowledge was refuted and the knowledge itself was deemed obsolete. The group lost the social acknowledgement of the validity of their technical competence. This process involves perceived loss of one's own social worth and the refusal or denial of this phenomenon.

In an "erratic" and desperate effort, risking everything in an "all or nothing" action typical of the "Unanimity" model (and not of the group's earlier pattern), the old professionals sabotaged the ISO 9001 program in an attempt to interrupt a modernization process that posed a threat to them. It was not a properly structured strategic action, but a risky attitude that could have been prevented had this group found in the new organization other forms of insertion through which they might be able to rebuild their earlier identity profile. As a result, we can conclude that the group resisted in order to defend the social means to maintain their baseline identity model of *"Democratic Solidarity,"* characterized by differentiation and by the ability to articulate and produce a unique rationality.

7. Conclusion: Organizational Change and Human Resources Management

This study conceives of organizational change as a non-regressive crisis that is overcome by the consolidation of a new social system with new games, practices and social habits. Change creates contradictions because there is a break from the old organizational system, although the new system must be built from the previous construct, which provides the only human experience available for the consolidation of the new.

Resistance to change is a very common phenomenon: Faced with changing working conditions, many resist because they feel threatened by transformations that may impair their adaptation to a new environment where relational skills, habits and strategies developed under the previous circumstances no longer serve as means of integration with or survival in the new framework. We are talking about deep-level structures of individual identity, that is, how it relates to others individually or in groups; its ability to perceive, analyze and act politically; its propensity to follow a certain type of leadership or not; its affections, etc.

Because internal structures that are the result of many years of adaptative action cannot be changed overnight, resistance to change may decrease if individuals are given, under the new structures, a possibility to act and use the means of action and cognition developed under the former organizational structure to identify with the new proposed organizational design, partially adapting action strategies to the new outlook. This is about making an early diagnosis of the social system and making the organizational change process include a transition structure that offers social actors room to reconstruct individual and collective identities.

Therefore, in the case of organizational change, individuals need to develop adaptative strategies in line with the new situation, be it by using the old social practices and relationship standards, or by creating new forms of interaction. Anomy, or the inability to reconstitute a new universe of standards and interactions, is often the consequence of a radical change in the power structure and everyday relationships at work.

The Political Human Resources Management model, promoting debate and discussion, allows individuals to train their capacity for strategic action and affirm autonomous and differentiated identities closer to the "Democratic Solidarity" model. Autocratic change, however, may lead to anomy and the adoption of evasive attitudes similar to the "Strategic Withdrawal" model.

This case study shows that a human resources management that fosters individual political emancipation and access to an autonomous identity capable of affirming a unique rationality is more

appropriate for today's organizations, as it leads to individuals capable of assigning meaning to experience and adapt better to a world of rapid and complex change.

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[i] According to Hegel, a fight "to the death" will take place between the two wills to possess an object, as in the pursuit of the acknowledgment of his strength by the other, the individual is really fighting to gain acknowledgement of his self and his autonomy. Therefore, in addition to needing the object, the human being needs the other to acknowledge his strength and validity as an autonomous individual, differentiated from others by a series of unique characteristics. As a result, there is no possible reconciliation in this kind of dialectic exchange, as victory represents the acknowledgement of the individual being by the other, and losing means renouncing this acknowledgement and submitting. For acknowledgement to exist, one of the individuals must forget or renounce his own will to be acknowledged and accept the other's will and strength. In this case, the "slave" (that has lost or renounced the conflict and acknowledgement) places himself at the service of the other's acknowledgement, avoiding the fight but losing part of his autonomy to drive his actions. The master adopts the conflict as a means of action, risking "death," but gaining the other's efforts on behalf of acknowledgment of his own will. In this context, the master-slave dialectic is embedded in a specific social reality, that is, the confrontation is concrete and takes place under specific circumstances, depending on the means and resources each individual controls according to his position within the organization.