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Ambivalent Elites and Conservative Modernizers. Studying Sideways in Transnational Contexts.

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Abstract

Spacially dispersed transnational professional communities can be perceived of as cultural formations living in a global frame of reference, transgressing existing political and cultural boundaries. In their capacity as members of local technical and knowledge-based elites, they take part in circulating and connecting cultural meanings that are both locally produced, and continuously re-working non-local flows. I argue that those elites can be described as actors at cultural interfaces, taking part in shaping and mediating social change. The aim is twofold: one, to point to mutually opposed tendencies, and ambivalences in the framework of a „culture of change", and two, to look into the question how such situations and groups can be methodologically approached.

Keywords: ambivalent elites, conservative modernisers, information technology, social change, transnational professional communities, methodology

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This paper addresses two issues, and makes a connection between them: first, the role of research subjects and researchers in „studying sideways", and second, ambivalent configurations of change. I will outline briefly both aspects from the perspective of a transnational research conducted among local technical elites, and I will then comment on why I consider „studying sideways" to be a useful method in this type of research.

Traditionally, researchers in ethnographic fieldwork have been in a position of social superiority vis-a-vis their research subjects. Laura Nader's classical essay from 1972 was one of the first to emphasize the necessity for anthropologists to „study up" in their own societies. In the ethnographic „research up", asymmetrical relations between researchers and research subjects switch directions: research subjects are now in a position of social superiority vis-a-vis the researcher (cf. Warneken/ Wittel 1997, 1).

In many investigations of contemporary anthropology, however, researchers are more likely to be on a par with their research subjects. This leads to what is sometimes called „horizontal" research or „research on equal terms" (Warneken/ Wittel 1997, 3), the idea being, for instance, that participants in the research situation share a similar academic or professional background. Also, research subjects may handle cultural phenomena in similar ways to those of anthropologists, but somehow according to their specific agendas Ulf Hannerz has termed research in these kinds of contexts „studying sideways" (Hannerz 1998).

Here, researchers and research subjects often share expert knowledge in a specific field. This may be the case when researchers have acquired some expertise in a domain in order to gain a better understanding of the field they are exploring. They may also be experts in their own right, for instance, they may have attained academic credentials and/or have long-term professional experiences in the domain in which they have decided to conduct an ethnography.

If researchers are actively engaged in the domain they make their object of study, the research will take place in a cultural setting shared by researchers and research subjects. Ethnographers are no longer „the professional strangers" but, rather, become „observing participants" (Alvesson 1999b, 11). In this setting, the role of the research subjects changes, too: they cease to be the classical informants, and instead become "both subjects and intellectual partners in inquiry" (Holmes/Marcus 2003).

Within the multi-sited framework of my investigation, I interviewed information technology (IT) experts in a variety of sites in the Republic of Cyprus, Colombia, Romania, India, and the USA.

I did not conduct a conventional ethnography of professional elites or expert cultures. Neither did I focus on everyday life of professionals, or forms of production of expert knowledge. My study was directed at understanding the „global frame of refer-

ence" (Castells 2000, 393) of my interviewees. I was interested in the cultural imaginaries of belonging to an emerging, global, digital world as well as in „conceptual configurations" (Marcus 1998, 19) of new information technologies.

Generally spoken, the settings of my interviews can be considered as horizontal, relatively symmetrical research situations. The two main factors defining these situations were both my academic and my professional background.

Nearly all of my interview partners have a university education. I assume that, as an academic myself, I did benefit from a specific trust between colleagues which is based on being part of this group, even though we may not be members of the same discipline. The reason for this may be that my interview partners and I share a series of conventions and standards or „cultural scripts" (Alvesson 1999a, 11f.) on how to speak about certain issues.

Additionally, being also a technical expert with a long-standing background in the field of computers, electronic networks, and new media, I share similar professional experiences with many of my interview partners. Being familiar with everyday work routines, and technological know-how, as well as with informal knowledge regarding the history, the narratives, and the jargon of this domain, played a certain role in constituting symmetrical relations in the field situation.

Another central aspect coming into play is that many of my interview partners offered their views on topics which, strictly speaking, lie outside their professional expertise, but which are part of their professional environment. Indeed, my research was not about technical assessments by technical experts, but rather about their opinions on specific aspects of contemporary social developments in a globalizing world.

Many of my interview partners had similar questions on their minds as I had – for instance, what is the impact of implementing technologies in different environments, and how can we evaluate our observations. They also tap many of the same information sources that I also tapped in my research.

Obviously, we have questions and interests in common. They make observations, they discuss them with their colleagues, and analyze them in the context of contemporary transformational processes under conditions of globalization. They direct their attention towards similar phenomena as I do, they see similar dilemmas.

They also make inputs into dominant discourses of technology and development, and in that take part in shaping cultural discourses about visions of a future world. Taking all this into account, it seems feasible to situate relevant parts of my research in the framework of „studying sideways".

I will now briefly outline configurations of new information technologies presented by my interview partners. For most of them, IT basically represents a condition facilitating the deployment of new options. IT was strongly linked to the notion of innovation and change. This can be partly explained by the key features of this technology itself: being reconfigurable and reprogrammable, and thus highly flexibel, adaptive, and changeable.

Also, my interview partners were convinced that the emerging IT sector opens up new resources, thereby facilitating change, innovation, and possibilites of channelling new ways into established conditions. For them, access to information systems – that is, access to knowledge, information, exchange, and communication – figures as a

key requirement for participation, openness, equal chances, and making use of new opportunities. Accordingly, those criteria play a central role for their configuration of IT.

Many of my interview partners were convinced that, for the first time in history, the new information technologies will provide less developed countries with a real chance to become „global players", and a chance to be on a par with the dominant economic powers. One of my interview partners in India emphasized: *"IT opens up chances, especially for third world countries like India"*.[1] One of my interview partners in the Republic of Cyprus explained: *"The Internet is the great equalizer. Big producers are now competing with small producers. One website is just as good as any other. People are competing now on different levels. The Internet is changing economy and opening up doors"*.

For many, a redistribution of resources today seems feasible – in contrast to earlier times. One of my interview partners in Romania pointed out: *"During the old era, if you were a developing country, you were a developing country forever. But now, you could benefit from this technology in order to have a bigger portion of the global pie."*

In order to be able to make use of the new opportunities, it is considered necessary to empower people for the new digital age. One of my interview partners in the Republic of Cyprus stressed the necessity of *"educating people to be able to accept change, and introduce change themselves"*.

It is interesting to observe that the concept of empowerment is at home in quite contradictory discourses. The term „empowerment" is well-known from the philosophy of the 1960s US-activists who were looking for a decentralized and participatory policy model. Empowerment is also an element of neoliberal theory (see Rose 1996; Cerny 1999). In this context, it is to be understood as empowerment for the competition of domains which are not traditionally considered as parts of the market framework – like governments – and of the individual.[2]

The term of empowerment also plays a significant role in discourses around electronic networks as a medium for democratization and participation, for the establishment of a new public sphere, and the emergence of new social movements. The early Internet pioneers were advocates of an allegedly libertarian philosophy of democracy, and of the empowerment of mankind by new technologies (cf. Barbrook/Cameron 1995).

Some of my interview partners in the San Francisco Bay Area referred explicitly to this spirit. One explained: *"Remember, years ago, when we first got involved, it all seemed so wonderful! Anybody with any vision could see how, if you get a bunch of computers to some kids in an African classroom, where they had one outlet, and were sitting in the mud, even they could learn anything that you and me could learn! The positive potential."* And she added: *"So, to us, technology is married to this left wing radical movement!"*

Another version of self-positioning amidst progressive forces was expressed by one of my interview partners in Romania: *"You never see people who work in the IT industry [in Romania] to vote with the communist, and with the extreme right party, and*

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[1] Quotes from my interviews are set in italics.
[2] In this notion, the empowered subject becomes an entrepreneurial subject, and by this is liberated from both debilitating state interventions and welfare induced dependency. These subjects are seen to become active on their own behalf.

so on. They always will vote with the liberal party. I might think, in the whole world it's the same. For me it's very pragmatic to have an open society. If people have an open mentality, they will buy Internet, and computers".

Opening up, and free trade are regarded as prerequisites in order to participate in the global market. A world open for trade is believed to be a better world (see Destler 1986, 4). Like many of the early US-American Internet pioneers, most of my interview partners were convinced that only the market forces would be able to create a decentralized communication system accessible for all (cf. Barbrook/Cameron 1995).

Many accused their governments of being too slow, due to their bureaucracies, or, more generally, to be averse towards innovation, and unwilling to change. They were criticized for neither investing in education, and research and development, nor in establishing new economic structures in the technology sector. Indeed, governments, for many, represented an obstacle to national economic and social development.

Most of my interview partners strongly opposed state intervention into the economy. They were convinced that the market is better equipped to deal flexibly with the accelerated transformational demands in today's world. However, they regarded it as a government task to provide conditions allowing its citizens to acquire the skills which will enable them to succeed in the global economy.

One of my interview partners in the Republic of Cyprus pointed out: *"At the end of the day, a person will have to be able to get a job. So he will have to have the right skills! And these right skills today mean computing, technology, Internet, all this kind of stuff. Unfortunately the government sees information technology in a very short-sighted way. Whenever you try to say something here, the first answer you will get: how much will it cost? But for education this question should not be raised at all. Especially education in technology, computing skills."*

As part of discourses around global change, the term „empowerment" is both part of a market-liberal rhetoric, and of a culture of critical discourse.[3] Both discourses converge in a shared faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies, and in rejecting state regulation (cf. Barbrook/Cameron 1995; Kroker/Weinstein 1994).

This is also reflected in the statements of many of my interview partners, which therefore often seem ambivalent. I want to situate these hybrid discourses in the context of a dominant cultural logic of change. At the same time, I consider this cultural logic of change as co-constructed by newly emerging and/or upwards mobile elites, whose interests fuse both with the ideology of the „free market", and ideals of empowerment and participation.[4]

There can be no doubt that a changed world, as it is conceptualized by my interview partners, is meant to be a „better" world. Information technology, in tandem with a market economy, for many clearly is part and parcel with participation, new access to resources, more individual independence, and getting away from „oppressive enclaves" (Burawoy et al. 2000, 31). The question remains, however, if this vision is feasible. This

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[3] Paley (2001) describes a similar tendency for the term „participation".

[4] See also Wehler (1975) for this notion. He describes elites as „carriers of modernization" (Wehler 1975, 38), and remarks on an „often almost schizophrenic neighborhood of innovativeness and conservatism" (Wehler 1975, 26).

assumption is contradicted by a growing digital divide which has been mentioned as a crucial issue by nearly all of my interview partners.

A redistribution of resources, benefiting less privileged groups, seems not to be achievable in the near future. One of my interview partners in Romania pointed out: "*You can have some benefit from this. But you still have an unequal distribution of the pie. You have what is* new. *You cannot change very much the distribution of the pie. But in the old regime, you could only* look *at the big players eating the entire pie. Now you are allowed to have a small piece, and this is an improvement*".

There appears to be a similarity to processes called „conservative modernization"[5] where politically induced reforms or restructuring did not lead to a new distribution of property, as hoped for, but perpetuated traditional concentrations of income, and by that the traditional pattern of inequality (cf. eg. Moises 1993; Graziano 2002).

The assessments of an interview partner in Colombia pointed into a similar direction: "*Unless something radical changes in this country [in Colombia], things are going to be the same. I don't think new technologies can help. The point is, everything is attached to the money, is attached to the way the government is run, the way the resources are oriented*".

Restructurings which only benefit an economic elite, and the urban middle classes can lead to an actual aggravation of an unfair distribution of resources. Other types of conservative modernization can lead to an actual improvement of life quality for many, however, at the same time this can help to consolidate the position of the ruling classes (cf. Khalaf 1998).

The question arises if the notion of restructuring through IT may be compared to some type of „conservative modernization", rather than being the alleged „deep", „fundamental" modernization suggested by the rhetoric of „radical" change, the IT-"revolution", the complete „reengineering" of whole societies, etc., as emphasized in a multiplicity of local and supra-local discourses.

My interview partners are advocates of a fairer world that overcomes old structures of exclusion, that empowers all, and facilitates participation for everyone. This does not imply that they represent a type of counterculture, arguing against capitalism or repressive state structures. But neither can they be considered neoliberal, new conservatives, promoting a philosophy of „adapt or die" (Telepolis 01.02.1996). The matter is more complex. One of my interview partners emphasized: "*You have to look and see beyond this 'ideological' attitude favorable to changes, and look who actually benefits of it, or not*".

Not surprisingly, my interview partners detect ambivalences in today's discourses. One Romanian interview partner explained: "*If you ask different people to define more precisely what type of society they want, they will have difficulties, and you will hear many things that are in contradiction. You will hear things that you say: ok, this is a market-liberal orientated guy. He goes on talking, and suddenly there is a contradiction. So, you don't have anything to orientate you. Definitely, it's a confused time*".

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[5] This concept is used by comparative modernization theory for social processes where restructuring is not equivalent with a „revolutionary break" with the past or with a so-called „deep modernization" (Sustaining Economic & Political Reform 2000). Originally the term was coined by Barrington Moore (Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy, 1966).

Recent works on processes of transnationalization increasingly comment on mutually opposed tendencies, disjunctures, paradoxes, ambivalences, ambiguities, and contradictions as central features of contemporary global transformational processes.

I would like to raise the question if „studying sideways" can offer other types of perspectives, or additional possibilities of interpretation, and analysis in the context of transnational research. I want to argue that, for my study, horizontal research situations appear to be an appropriate setting in order to be able to render visible backgrounds of ambivalences, and mutually opposed tendencies in conceptual configurations of change through new technologies, and to describe them as a part of complex contexts of interests in global transformational processes.

„Studying sideways" may imply that research subjects and researchers share similar formal, and informal knowledge, interpreting and processing it in broader contexts. Additionally, both have a vested interest in influencing dynamics of social and cultural change – each within their own agendas and within different scopes.

These considerations, however, must be evaluated in the light of studies to come focussing their attention on horizontal types of research in transnational contexts. A couple of questions arise here, among them that of the loss of distance of researchers by being familiar both with the field, and with the research subjects. We also must ask which aspects escape the researchers' attention in the face of a taken-for-granted common background, which may influence the analysis and the interpretation of the results.

At the same time, the question has to be raised how ethnographic knowledge can actually be produced by experience in transnational contexts at all. Even though these kinds of questions are still open for discussion, I want to argue that „studying sideways" seems to be suited to the study of complexity in transnational contexts marked by mutually opposed tendencies and ambivalences.

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