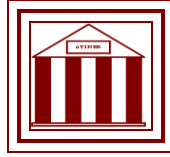


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**Articulation of Resistance
Strategies and Processes of
Consent among White Collar
Workers in Turkey**

**Ayça Yılmaz
MA Graduate
Galatasaray University
Turkey**

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209
Email: info@atiner.gr URL: www.atiner.gr
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Articulation of Resistance Strategies and Processes of Consent among White Collar Workers in Turkey

Ayça Yılmaz
MA Graduate
Galatasaray University
Turkey

Abstract

In contemporary societies, each day we witness the pressure that the neoliberal work regime urges on the employees. The main aim of this research is to comprehend 1) the structural constraints which white collar workers were exposed to; 2) their resistance strategies; 3) how these two facts co-existed; 4) how each of them transformed one another. I found it meaningful to apprehend such an articulation in contemporary societies in terms of evaluating the types of resistance and the conditions of social change. At the end of my research, I reached the consequence that, in general terms, the white collars consent the working conditions to a great extent. They particularly avoid collective resistance, and with the individual strategies they develop, they try to ease the constraints of the system imposed on them. In the light of the semi-structured interviews, I determined six categories which represent their attitudes towards the working life: 1) *Praise of work* attitude, which emphasizes the virtue of working, 2) *Reference to industrial and pre-industrial labor*, which is relatively autonomous and represents the wish for an emancipated working life, 3) *Quest for flexibility*, where flexibility is considered as emancipation and which is affirmed as well, 4) *Individualization emphasis*, 5) Inability to discern between the terms work and profession, 6) *Regarding working as an indicator of privileges*. Also, I gathered the individual strategies against working conditions in three categories, which I named as *resistance typology*: negotiator, tenacious, cunning.

Keywords:

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Introduction

Labour and working conditions have constituted one of the most controversial subjects of philosophy and social sciences. Therefore, in contemporary post-industrial societies where neoliberal politics organize social life, work as a social institution continues to maintain its importance both for researchers and employees. In this paper, Turkish white collar workers' working life experiences will be analyzed in a dialectical perspective, which has been shaped throughout the opposition between consent and resistance as a reaction that the employees give to neoliberal working conditions. By researching such an articulation of consent and resistance strategies, I aim to figure out the dynamics of social change, which is, in fact, a complex process. In other words, I tried to harmonise with structural and individualist viewpoints to better comprehend employees' conceptions about their working condition. So, the research questions could range in the following way: Are the individuals exposed to the constraints of the neoliberal economic system, or are they able to develop collective resistance that would liberate them from this constraint? If they are unable to develop a collective resistance, do they have any individual strategies? And more importantly, are these individual strategies sufficient to provide social change?

With the withdrawal of public power and neoliberal working conditions, workers have been experiencing many constraints and difficulties in their working life. Precarization of labour, intensification of work, nonstop surveillance, mobbing, health problems or violation of labour rights can serve examples. The new paradigm which started in 1980s subsequent to oil shock is predicated on a flexible accumulation of capital and new management techniques, such as humanization (Durand, 1965) and individualization of work, responsabilization of employees (Boltanski, 1999; Baudrillard, 2011; Bell, 1975), cult of performance (Ehrenberg, 1991), teamwork and creativity (Sennett, 2007). In fact, this transformation originates from the change in the object of production. Opposite to the industrial production, this new economy bases on service and production of abstract commodity. As a consequence, labour has become more flexible by the nature of capital in comparison with industrial labour.

In the sense of labour, the most crucial point of neoliberal regime is its capacity to create consent. In this context, Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) underline that the singularity of the new economy is due to consent it assures among employees. The new type of employee, i.e. white collar worker as Mills (2002) indicates, is composed to individuals who affirm economic system by voluntary participation. According to Mills, employee's voluntary participation to the economic system could be explained by the lack of explicit confrontation between capitalists and workers, that is to say employees do not represent a power against capital any longer, but they represent the new smiling face of capital. For the reason that individuals are educated in a society where neoliberal working conditions are affirmed by education system, they graduate from universities as prepared and voluntary to work in these conditions.

Moreover, in their working life, when they face the working conditions, they mostly develop a discourse of affirmation. In other words, they internalize the exigency of circumstances (Thébaud, 2008). Therefore, the white collars position themselves apart from other workers since they are well educated and cultivated. With this speciality, white collars constitute a social class, which controls and manages the capital. On the other hand, white collars' ability to control the capital does not annihilate the fact that they are the object of capitalism and are exploited by it. Therefore, Bourdieu (1997) argues that the processes of consent among white collars result from a process of auto-exploitation.

In addition, Baudrillard's (2011) concept of consumption society can be enlightening for understanding the consent that white collar workers develop against working conditions. According to consumption theory, needs are produced by the system of production and become objects of consumption which offer individuals an illusory world of abundance and therefore an illusory freedom of choice. By the reason of the fact that the satisfaction acquired from an object of consumption is provisional, the individual continues to desire other objects. In this sense, work becomes the only way to reach this world of abundance.

Nevertheless, it will be deficient to describe neoliberal working conditions merely with processes of consent, since employees have resistance strategies against constraint and difficulties they face, which help them to integrate into or change the conditions. In contemporary world, the development of information technology and the globalization process subsequent to the transformation of the production system constitute the major motivator of the social resistance. Castells (2001; 53) mentions that information technology, particularly Internet, is a technological medium for horizontal communication and a new form of free speech, as a consequence of new form of public opposition. Bauman (1998) discusses the globalization phenomenon as a double process which contains within itself both resistance and standardization. On the other hand, Hirschman (1982) focuses on consumption society, which has the capacity for creating consumers-citizen. According to him, the consumption is not merely a private but also a public act, which could mobilize disappointed consumers against producers, suppliers or retailers or lawmakers. Therefore, the disappointment can be resulted in individual resistance, such as public speaking or complaint.

In consequence, as I adopted a dialectical perspective to understand the possible conditions of social change, I found it meaningful to discover the reasons of consent and the germ of resistance at the same time.

Method

In this research, I particularly studied the white collars as they formed the core of the neoliberal working regime. Despite the fact that this regime spread to other social domains, including the public sphere, the private sector is still

the realm where working order is crystallized. Also, in order to create a wide comparison field for my research object, instead of dealing with only one specific sector or the employees at the same position, I canalized to the employees' experience one by one so that I could establish a relative generality. Therefore, I made semi-structured interviews with 44 white collars at different positions from various sectors. The main reason why I prefer the semi-structured interviews is that it gives rich information and provides direct communication with the interviewee. As it will be less directive in comparison with quantitative methods, the answers were likely to be more reliable and detailed (Quivy, Campenhoudt, 1995:194-198). I analyzed the data, which I have collected via the semi-structured interview method, through the content analysis method.

These 44 interviewees, 21 women and 23 men, are chosen at random and by snowball sampling methods among white collars from private sector. I made my interviews particularly in Istanbul and in Izmir with regards to the following criteria: 1) being integrated into global capital; 2) the development of service sector; 3) more competitive free market conditions. These two cities are also accepted as the most developed cities in Turkey according to the data obtained from "Socio-Economic Development Order of Cities and Regions", which was announced in 2011 by the Ministry of Development. I can point out that the place of work, geographically, has importance in the interviewees' responses because the relation constructed by workers with the economic system which bases on the capacity of the city with regards to its capability to create postindustrial relations of production.

Results and Discussions

Attitudes towards working Conditions as Indicator of Consent

Employees' first attitude towards working life is *praise of work*. Praise of work attitude signifies a Weberian conception of work, which associate work to religious beliefs and moral values (Weber, 2002). Interviewees define work as a fundamental act of life, therefore as an obligation of human being. In one hand, this particularity of work is due to the necessity for satisfaction of basic needs of human, on the other hand, work is conceived by white collars as a virtue and as a sign of moral and faith, since an individual who gives preference to joblessness, represents an idler who could not live as a responsible individual. The reaction against idleness originates not only from modernity discourse (Foucault, 1975), but also from Islamic way of life. According to the Islamic belief, there are two notions which enable us to comprehend the Islamic representation of work: *Rizik* (blessing of God) and *Sukur* (gratitude to God). That is to say, an individual could not acquire *Rizik* without working no matter what happens, and after being acquired, he must be

grateful for what God gives. This cycle of work bases on a system of deserts and recompense.¹ Each interviewee affirms this conception of work:

‘I cannot think that I do not work. We must earn our bread. Honestly. You know what they say, if necessary you must make a living the hard way!’. (Female, 31 years old)

The second attitude towards working life is *the reference to industrial and preindustrial labour*. 54% (24/44) of the white collar workers have desire to change in working conditions in favour of previous types of labour. The interviewees express that they do not feel like real workers because of the deficiency of remuneration in a psychological sense. In other words, they do not feel they work since the nature of their job is affective in the sense that its products are intangible (Hardt, 1999). This interviewee complains in the following way:

‘I would like to work in a job where I can receive a recompense for my work. If I were a farmer, I could at least get some food. That is why I grow tomatoes in my balcony. It makes me feel useful’ (Female, 24 years old).

Another aspect of this attitude is the desire to set up one’s own business. Most of the white collar workers who participated in this study, dream of having a little shop and being a business owner. One of them says ‘If I could, I would prefer being a fisherman’. (Male, 26 years old). The *inability to discern between terms work and profession*, which constitutes one of the attitudes towards working life, correlates with *the reference to industrial and preindustrial labour* in terms of the immateriality of labour. During interviews, it was observed that the white collars had difficulties in pronouncing their profession since there is a deviance between what they do as a job and the university department they graduated. The expression of this interviewee (Male, 30 years old) can be cited as an example:

‘Interviewer: What is your profession?’

‘Interviewee: How can I say...I am a marketing director, but...Take a note as management, please’

The third behaviour that the white collars show in their working life is the *quest for flexibility*; although flexible working conditions constitute a question of debate in academic, political and union circles with regards to precarization of labour. 81% of employees (36/44) affirm flexible working conditions because it is considered as emancipation and autonomy, where the authoritative

¹Theologian Yaşar Nuri Öztürk (1994; 486) indicates: “There is only work for a human being. One day, he will receive the recompense of his work. In the end, he will completely be recompensed”.

figure of working life is absent. ‘The flexibility assures I feel free even in workplace’ (Male, 27 years old), says one employee. Another expresses;

‘For an employee, who is aware of his responsibilities, the flexibility is a good thing because he can arrange the time by himself to finish his works’ (Female, 42 years old).

The other aspect *individualization emphasis* can be examined with quest for flexibility attitude since flexibility is a part of the individualization discourse. The white collars express their recruitment processes, their positions in working life, or briefly stated their individual history about working life with the word ‘choice’, ‘will’, ‘desire’, ‘planning’ or ‘content’. It means that these employees consider themselves as actors rather than being exposed to bad working conditions. Even if they complain about the working conditions, they indicate that it was their free will.

Finally, the attitude of *regarding working life as an indicator of privileges* can be explained by an aim of distinction in Bourdieu’s term (1979). These new white collar workers emerged by 80s and 90s with the rise of the university education, constitutes a new urban class, which are the representatives of liberal economy, individuality and new forms of social distinction (Bali, 2002). According to the interviews, job represents the unique possibility to reach a distinctive life style and a high social position. ‘I try to maintain a standard of living. I even try to ameliorate it. Certainly, I am working for the betterment of my life quality, maintaining my prestige and my privileges in the society’ (Male, 36 years old).

A Typology of Resistance through working Practices

In general terms, the white collars consent the working conditions to a great extent. They particularly avoid collective resistance, and with the individual strategies they develop, they try to ease the constraints of the system imposed on them. In this study, resistance strategies and processes of consent could be observable concurrently or in the same form of attitude, that is to say, these two reactions against working conditions are melded and constitute, as argues Bauman in the globalization context, a fusion of standardization and resistance. For this reason, these two attitudes could not be considered as the distinct sides of a medallion. Therefore I used a large definition of resistance and considered the acts and attitudes such as *consent*, *handling* and *overcoming* in this definition. It seems rather hard for the individuals to take place in an organized resistance. Surely this situation can be explained, by and large, with the economic transformation in the global level as well as with the historical dynamics as we see in the Turkish context. In this sense, legal struggles and actions for the rights in 1960s and 70s, when industry based economy reigned over, gave its place to political fights particularly in 1970s.

However in 1980, firstly the 24 January Decisions¹ which proposed that the existing protectionist economy politics be quitted, and after that the 12 September Military Coup, which prepared the legal platform to help these decisions function made a serious impact on the public opposition (Ergur, 2002:220). Until today, a great number of political scientists have argued that the 1980 Military Coup blocked political opposition in Turkey and made the society, particularly the young people, apolitical. Some other researchers, on the other hand, are against this viewpoint and assert that this indifference, in fact, was a political stance and it contained opposition within itself (Lüküslü, 2008).

In this part, in order to indicate diverse tactics against bad working condition, three main strategies of resistance developed by employees will be analyzed with reference to the ideal-types in Weber's methodology. According to him, the construction of ideal-types in a sociological analyze which is based on frequency of the fact, contributes comprehension of social reality by forming a deviation between social reality and the ideal type constructed by researcher (Weber, 2002:27-31). This deviation shows us a sociological fact. However it must be noted that this typology is resulted from a fieldwork that the participants are relatively limited.

Negotiator

Individuals, frequently, make use of negotiation as a strategy to manage the conditions of their daily life. Therefore, Strauss (1992) argues that negotiation constitutes the basis of interpersonal relationships. However, more significantly, this strategy represents an individual type who lives in societies where communication skills and flexibility are accepted as an economic value. In other words, flexibilization of social relations and the rise of negotiation as a social norm were emerged as a result of the transformation of capital accumulation. The negotiation represents, in fact, a worker (and also a social) behavior developed by individuals in the face of instantaneous changes encountered in economy. Consequently, negotiation is considered one of the most important skills in working life and job advertisements which demand high communication skills and ability to work in a team, verify the cruciality of negotiation in a workplace.

59% (26/44) of employees who participated in this research confirm that they give preference to negotiation if they face with undesirable, unjust or unequal conditions. The principal characteristic of these negotiators is their ability and their know-how to manage and manipulate human relations. The negotiator type uses negotiation as a resistance strategy so that this environment of agreement can help communication continue. The negotiator type believes that if the communication breaks due to any reason, this will lead him to lose his

¹With these decisions, a series of precautions were taken in order to restrict the role of state in the economy, and therefore the commodity market would enter the foreign markets, the regime of import would be liberalised, and with the export promotion, wage costs of labour would decrease. ErinçYeldan (2001). KüreselleşmeSürecindeTürkiyeEkonomisi, İletişimYayımları, İstanbul.

strategy domain, so he considers such a possibility as a danger. As a result, the subject of negotiation has importance, that is to say it needs to be about small things related to daily life, which are seen as negotiable for both sides, instead of structural problems. For example, according to the interviewees, if the employee quits job or takes legal action against undesirable working conditions, it is not considered as a threat by the employer, since it ends up with the radicalization and isolation of the employee. 'I prefer to talk something out. It always works' (Female, 25 years old). 'When I am confronted by a problem, I mostly talk to my boss about my opinions'. (Male, 38 years old)

As a result, negotiation could be examined at the same time as a personal qualification expected by employer and as a domain of individual strategy.

Tenacious

The tenacious type who could be defined as a symbol of resolution, considers the harmony in his working life important. He performs a resistance over the strategy of conformity. Until he owns the power to change things, he endures bad working conditions and when he experiences any injustice, he prefers to be patient instead of acting immediately. 22% (10/44) of interviewees represent the ones who adopt tenacity as a resistance strategy. 'I usually prefer to be patient when I confront a problem in my working life, but maybe later I could change my job if the problem continues to exist'. (Female, 25 years old)

The tenacious type does not consent that the scene of tenacity is interrupted by other employees who attempt to resist to working conditions in a challenging way. The reason why this type of individual dislikes this sort of attitude is the possibility that the others may block his domain of action, and therefore his strategy of resistance. He believes that tenacity will bring him justice he deserved. In this context, it is considerable that these 10 employees represent relatively a young group who began to work in the last five years. For these young people, work signifies a good future accessible purely with hard work. Since they interiorize the ideology of meritocracy, they attribute value to professional and social positions.

Although the tenacious type appears to consent and tolerate the bad working conditions, I consider his attitude as a strategy of resistance by reason of his awareness about working conditions. In this sense, it differs from the *conformist type* mentioned by Merton (1965). Merton (1965; 170) argues that every society proposes its members legitimate goals and legitimate means to be used to reach these goals. The harmony between the goals accepted by the society and the means to make these goals possible creates a society whose members are satisfied. However, any disharmony or contradiction between these two is likely to have different effects on the society. According to this, the conformist type is defined as an individual who accepts and affirms the goals and the means determined by a society. From this point forth, when compared with conformist type, tenacious type is an individual who does not accept the goals and means voluntarily. On the contrary, although he tolerates

the conditions, he criticizes these goals and means. In other words, he accepts them until he owns power to change these legitimate goals and means.

This type of employee works through channels, since he is aware that he will be able to change the rules of game after he gained it.

Cunning

The cunning type, whom we meet in the working life quite frequently, resists the circumstances by hiding his reactance. He shows no reaction against bad conditions and even behaves in accordance with the conditions; yet he violates the norms by evading constantly. 8 interviewees (18%) present this strategy of resistance against working conditions. For example, these interviewees complain about eight hours day and express that they occupy themselves with other things than work: reading online newspaper, online shopping, having breakfast in office, chattering with coworkers or run out of workplace early.

In this case, lie constitutes the main tactic for employees due to the fact that they pretend to be having respect for all working conditions. As mentioned Simmel (1998), lie bases on metamorphose of the internal reality of a person and the manipulation of personal representation. The cunning type manipulates the truth about him and modifies his image. In this research, traffic congestion and fake illnesses are ranged by interviewees as the top subjects of lie. The others subjects of lie could be collected under the title of ‘pretext to go out of the office’. One employee states:

‘One day, I was feeling tired. I wanted to go home and sleep. As a part of my job, I had to visit some firms to make them my client. This time, I called one of my friends who run a small textile company. I arranged a fake appointment with him and went to my home and slept one hour. That was funny’. (Female, 22 years old)

In this statement, it is seen that this employee does not prefer to use the right to leave (excused absence), although she has the right of annual leave minimum for two weeks according to the Turkish Labor Law. Instead of this, she chooses to evade since, by doing this, she pretends to be in accordance with the rules of company and avoids exercising her rights.

Concluding Remarks

Throughout this research, I obtained data regarding the white collars’ working life, their possible reasons of consent and their individual resistance strategies. In the light of the questionnaire carried out, I determined six subjects which represent the white collars’ attitudes towards the working life: 1) *Praise of work* attitude, which emphasizes the virtue of working, 2) *Reference to industrial and pre-industrial labor*, which is relatively autonomous and represents the wish for an emancipated working life, 3) *Quest for flexibility*, where flexibility is considered as emancipation and which is affirmed as well,

4) *Individualization emphasis*, 5) Inability to discern between the terms work and profession, 6) *Regarding working as an indicator of privileges*. As my purpose is to study the articulation of the systematic pressures and individual resistance strategies, I, therefore examined the resistance of the individuals against bad working conditions together with their process of consent. The data shows that white collar workers prefer to resist over individual strategies instead of collective reaction. In the light of the data I obtained from the semi-structured interviews, I gathered the individual strategies against working conditions in three categories, which I named as *resistance typology*: negotiator, tenacious, cunning. The negotiator type uses negotiation as a resistance strategy so that this environment of agreement can help communication continue. The negotiator type believes that if the communication breaks due to any reason, this will lead him to lose his strategy domain, so he considers such a possibility as a danger. The tenacious type performs a resistance over the strategy of conformity. Until he owns the power to change things, he endures bad working conditions and when he experiences any injustice, he prefers to be patient instead of acting immediately. The cunning type resists the circumstances by hiding his reactance. He shows no reaction against bad conditions and he behaves in accordance with the conditions; yet he violates the norms by evading constantly.

However the main question which needs to be answered after this fieldwork is whether the social change is possible through individual strategies which are not grounded on solidarity of white collar workers. In this sense, the effect of individual resistance strategies can be elaborated as controversial since they are simply absorbable by the system. Also, each individual act of resistance minimizes the intensity of the reaction and the economic system can easily be capable to compete these kinds of strengthless reactions and reorganizes.

Nevertheless, I find Bhabha's concept (2007) of mimic man meaningful to discuss the possibility of social change through working life. In his theory, Bhabha, underlines the importance of individual resistance of the colonized subject in the face of colonialist power. According to this point of view, the repetition of rules or norms by an individual may have an adverse impact on the reification of power. By repeating the rules, individual mimes the subject of power, but each mimic symbolizes a potential transformation of the rule, since each mimic is an individual interpretation and an incomplete representation of power. Therefore, mimic man positions himself between consent and resistance, and he is able to skew the rules.

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