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THE COLLABORATIVE SUBJECT: A CRITICAL SUB-CONTRACTOR PERSPECTIVE

Afroz Zain Algiers¹

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on sub-contractor resistance in a complex design-assist project in which the general contractor and the sub-contractors simultaneously decided to bring in various lean planning tools in the construction phase. This project is interesting because despite the attempt to work collaboratively, the accountability and teamwork breaks down at multiple points in the chain and yields an uncertainty that comes to be seen as disrespectful, patronizing, exploitative and uncaring.

By analyzing resistance, we gain an understanding of the types of demands being made of individuals. Studying resistance can show us the nature of the ideal worker being crafted. This has political implications for worker organizing.

KEYWORDS

Ethnography, Collaboration, Critical Management Studies, Foucault.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations are constantly looking for ways to produce committed and 'adaptable' employees, who are willing to stretch the boundaries of their usual responsibilities in cross-functional teams (Ezzamel and Willmott 1998). There is limited empirical research describing the difficulty in implementing collaborative practices in the construction sector (Bresnen, Goussevskaia, & Swan, 2005), and crucially, there is growing awareness within the project management community that contracts alone cannot create the desired results (Bresnen and Marshall 2000a, 2000b, 2000c).

The construction industry uses contracts to create temporary hierarchies on a project (Stinchcombe, 1985). This hierarchy mandates a formal status structure and command system which aids coordination and allows for the risks to rest with the planner and not the worker. However, on the downside, this contractually enforced fragmentation promotes a culture of self-protective or self-interested behaviors and has been described in literature as 'Broken Agency' (Henisz et al. 2012). The current consensus in the Architecture-Engineering-Construction (AEC) literature is that the fragmented nature of the construction supply chain (Fergusson, 1993) impedes it from producing innovations (Sheffer & Levitt, 2010). Moreover, at the outset of complex projects, scope is often vaguely defined and consequences are difficult to predict (Miller & et. al, 2001). Thus, there is an industry-wide movement to push for integrated work practices to solve the inefficiency of fragmentation. To this end, clients desirous of more control over uncertainty and flexibility in innovative, complex projects, have recently chosen to deploy relational contracts (Williamson, 1979) and practices.

However, critical studies Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Hodgson, 2004; Sage et al., 2010) have shown that projects can reinstate rigid, formal structures of control, and claimed that post-bureaucracy is merely the reinvigoration of the familiar bureaucratic arrangement (Clegg & Courpasson, 2004, Hodgson, 2004). Or in other words, "employees are provided with the skills that enable them to regulate themselves in the absence of managerial gaze" (Ogbor, 2001). This leads to a willingness on the part of the workers to exploit their fellow teammates & allow themselves to be exploited to further these values and goals. Such studies challenge notions that egalitarian terminology used by projects (e.g., 'collaboration', 'equal partners', 'trust', 'power to the edge', etc) are an indication of the construction industry moving beyond

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competitive and stressful workplace processes ('plan-monitor-deliver') designed solely to achieve the 'Iron Triangle' (Atkinson 1999) targets of time, cost and quality. The social and political consequences of this shift in organization of work have largely been left unaddressed (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2005).

In line with the critical research tradition, I do not intend on dismissing the potential benefits of teamwork, but aim to situate it in a nuanced analysis of crafting of a subject within power relations. I will use the following section to explain the relevance of studying power in this setting.

BACKGROUND

Following in a Foucauldian tradition, I'm not concerned with the essence of power (i.e., what is it? Or who possesses it?), but I understand it as 'performing a particular politico-ethical project' that is both productive and repressive (Dyrberg 1997). Hence, my interest lies in *what it does, how it does so* and the *resistance* it faces.

Foucault's main claim connected to discipline is that power does not simply repress: "In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him [sic] belong to this production." (Foucault, 1974). The apparatus of discipline (bodies in prisons, hospitals, schools) works through hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and examination (Foucault, 1977). The apparatus of security (the self in neoliberal government) works through making subjects through freedom & responsabilisation, immaterial labor, and techniques for performance measurement i.e., audit mechanisms (Foucault, 2008).

The majority of management studies have been particularly concerned with the concepts of 'disciplinary power' and 'the Panopticon' in order to help explain workplace phenomena and management practice (e.g, McKinlay and Starkey 1998; Townley 1994, 1998, 2005; Savage 1998; Clegg 1994; Knights 1992; McCabe 2007, 2010; McKinlay 2006). I focus on the security apparatus in my study, but show that they both co-exist.

Employee management has moved from the "organizational man" (Whyte, 1956) in Marx's factory to Weber's (1946) bureaucracy to what Fleming (2014) describes as an "emphasis on life" in modern corporations. Currently, an emphasis is placed on harnessing tacit knowledge and skills of employees, as illustrated by the common use of "we screen by qualifications, but hire by attitude" by General Contractors when asked about specialty contracting practices. As construction service work demands more enthusiasm, creativity and flexibility from workers, their jobs begin to require work that goes 'above and beyond', such as cooperation, proactivity, emotional intelligence, social aptitude, trust, authenticity, etc (see Fleming 2014 for a review). Given that this "immaterial labor" (Lazzarato 1996, Virno 2004) cannot simply be commanded using a hierarchical bureaucracy (Perelman, 2011; Pink, 2011), it is invoked by blurring the boundaries between life and work (Hardt & Negri 2009, Deleuze 1992). At first glance, the loss of the "disinterested and impersonal" (Weber, 1946) office employee might be a welcome relaxation of rules. However, the enlistment of "life attributes" as a regulatory apparatus (also called "biopower") needs to be critically examined for its psychological and material consequences to workers.

Although studies have begun to document the pervasiveness and impacts of biopower, there is limited understanding about resistance against it (Fleming, 2014). In early mainstream management studies in the US, the term 'resistance' carried with it tones of negativity (Coch and French 1948). However, more recently, the term 'resistance' has taken a more neutral form as an unavoidable part of organizational life (Jermier et. al 1994; Mumby 2005). However, resistance is often conceived as being in opposition to power, and thus as representing the adversary. A Foucauldian conception treats resistance as intertwined with and constitutive of

power relationships. Resistance is often depicted through distancing mechanisms such as humor, (Ezzamel, Willmott & Worthington, 2001), skepticism (Fleming & Spicer, 2002) cynicism (Fleming & Spicer, 2003) or irony (Musson & Duberley, 2007). However, such a limited allowance of resistance paints a rather pessimistic picture of totalitarian managerial control with bleak hope of emancipation for workers (Willmott, 1993, Newton, 1998). This paper presents a more optimistic approach to studying resistance which accounts for both discourse and socio-material practices. If knowledge work is conducted and relayed through material objects, e.g., visual representations in architectural design (Ewenstein and Whyte, 2009) or accounting practices in a retailing company (Ezzamel & Willmott 1998), given the Foucauldian power/knowledge framework (Foucault 1975, 1980), power could be located in socio-material practices (Latour 2005), and not simply be limited to speech and texts. Hence, this study carefully pays attention to not only texts and speech, but also material motifs like design & coordination technology, layout of the collaborative spaces, authorized and emergent work processes, etc.

There are different ways to analyze the behaviors that can seem to be resisting change (Rantakari & Vaara 2016):

- Functionalist-managerialist (“how to overcome resistance to change for the benefit of the capitalist enterprise?”)
- Interpretative (“acknowledge ambiguity, struggle over meaning”)
- Critical – resistance as subjectivity – (“constitutive role of power & resistance”)

Here, I am using the critical perspective. Critical research seeks to “describe, analyze and open to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centers and assumptions that inhibit, repress and constrain.” (Thomas 1993). It is a nuanced critique that questions phenomena that seem natural, necessary or well-accepted. The researcher looks for empirical evidence of resistance to the established order and develops unconventional understandings of the naturalized phenomena. The hallmark traditions of critical studies include: De-naturalization, Anti-Performativity & Reflexivity (Fournier & Grey 2000). Such questioning ignites thoughtful discussions and sets the stage for a transformation towards more equitable forms of human organizing. To be explicit, the goal is not to engineer "the ultimate" new system of social relations, but to encourage the practice of critiquing and constantly moving towards freedom from oppression in various specific contexts.

If this academic and moral motivation is accepted, the next order of business is to understand the process of critiquing. One key methodological concern is the difficulty of collecting empirical evidence on critical projects. This is vividly described by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) as, “we can hardly go around asking people about their psychic prisons or false consciousness or communicative distortions and so on.” Often, informants are unaware of the larger structures that shape their life conditions (Jermier 1998) and cannot detail the dynamics upon the researcher's request. Nevertheless, there are examples of critical ethnographies (e.g., Forester, 1992; Knights and Willmott 1987, 1992; Ezzamel & Willmott 1998) that use the analytical tool of challenging the natural order (Alvesson and Deetz 2000) to generate useful insights. This practice of critique can be expressed in three "moments": 'interpretation producing insights, critique exploring domination and repression, and transformative re-definition indicating alternative ways of imagining and relating to what exists' (Alvesson 2011)

By studying the practices, reactions and reflections, we can infer an understanding about what type of ideal “subject” (in Foucauldian terms) was being produced on site and how. I argue that the “subject” created is free and flexible, yet governable. The creation of this “subject” depends on how power acts in discourse, practice and specific “knowledge” or “ways of knowing”. The adoption of this “subject” as the image of the ideal construction worker has implications for how organized labor functions.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This is a three month ethnography of a large, high budget, complex, commercial project in western United States. The study focuses on the experience of the sub-contractor foremen, superintendents, detailer, scheduler, project engineers, project managers and vice-president. It helps illuminate resistance to changing work practices and provides a critical analysis of how workers are crafted in the process.

Given my background in energy efficiency, I focused specifically on the employees of specialty contractors for Mechanical, Electrical & Plumbing. The immersion was crucial in understanding the tacit meaning of actions, words and artifacts (Lofland & Lofland, 2006) and is in keeping with the feminist theme of situatedness (Mohanty, 1988). The managerial gaze often assumes meanings across contexts and fails to locate practices in existing local social structures. This research hopes to counter that by amplifying the voice of those subject to these practices.

I investigated how work was described on this projects in contrast to the traditional contract agreements. I noted ‘approved’ work processes, language, symbols used, acceptable behavior, routines, etc and looked for praise and criticism of work done. The ethnography granted me access to everyday practices which I problematized in order to hypothesize the ways in which bodies acquire certain roles and values and are subject to differing norms in various contexts. This allowed for an investigation of the co-creation of values and meanings in a working team without ignoring the interdependence and agency of actors.

Specifically, I analyzed meanings attached to the adoption of "flattening" coordination technology, streamlining processes and collaborative spaces. I also produced “thick descriptions (Geert, 2002) of how the leadership and workers directly and indirectly produced a vision of a team player identity through participating in substantive and symbolic management practices. In my interviews, I listened for references to rules, norms and ‘taken-for-granted’ knowledge and their sources. I also looked for practices of "reality enforcement" (Bettcher, 2014) used to ascribe or take away specific aspects of an employee's identity.

The resultant data were thoroughly analyzed for patterns through iterative coding for theoretical categories (Saldaña 2012) using the qualitative analysis software NVivo. The interpretive abstraction s based on the patterns revealed during the initial memoing (Miles and Hubermann, 1994).

Data sources included:

1. Participant observations of inter-organizational design and coordination meetings, integrated workspaces & team sessions, site work, etc. Seven types of meetings: Pull planning, BIM, Commissioning, MEP Coordination, Fitout, Staff Meetings, vPlanner meetings
2. Interviews (semi-structured)- The project team members, specifically focusing on the in-depth experience of the MEP craftworkers. Interviews of: Foremen, Superintendents, Engineers, Project Managers, Vice Presidents.
3. Journal and field notes of informal interaction with the actors outside of the formal meeting spaces and interviews.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

My main claim is that the practices on this project craft a subject that is free and flexible, yet, governable. I will use this section to describe how I arrived at this description. I will provide a brief description of the project and follow with my critical analysis. Since I take a critical constructivist perspective, it is impossible to separate my findings from my discussion section.

Hence, this section will contain both, my observations and my analysis, of the practices I investigated.

Project description

This was a high budget, complex office building. It was complex because of strict owner requirements regarding the architecture and finish. The project was over-budget, behind schedule, in early construction. It is now finally close to completion three years late.

Background on the key players

The general contractor (GC) was a joint venture between two very respected firms. One known for its focus on safety and quality (self-performs work) and the other with a history of acting as a GC/CM and being involved in the design stage (without self-performing work). The unionized subcontractors were on cost+ contracts. Later on in the project (post my fieldwork), the owner/client fired the two general contractors because of rising costs and delayed schedule. There were also protests about prevailing wage rates on the project by plumbers, steamfitters and carpenters. These were both at the project site and off-site.

Specific work processes introduced and why

To tackle the delayed schedule, the general contractor introduced “pull planning”, a lean practice that works on the principle of “Power to the Edge”, i.e, the people doing the work actually plan the work. This is a significant break from the Fordist model of separation between those that plan and those that execute. Cooperation was introduced as an economic necessity and collaborative endeavor. This was met with different reactions from the subcontractors – including acceptance and resistance.

Going from week to week, even as the physical project lagged, a positive alternate reality was established in the software and on paper. This remained a material trail of promises made but not kept. This illusion is maintained because the GC wants to show progress to the client, and the subs, although frustrated, yield to this make-believe situation and find other ways to continue working. The plan is a constant reminder of how far behind they are, and how the schedule keeps slipping. Their achievements and failures are no longer in personal and collective memory, but inscribed on paper and software for all to see. The participants see these meetings as a way to enable conformity, subjugate and kill questions.

Brief description of events

For this paper, I will focus on a subset of three types of coordination meetings. The first is a Building Information Modeling (BIM) coordination meeting attended by the General Contractor (G.C), Owner, Architect, Design Professionals, and Trades. These are ‘office personnel’ meetings (attended by Detailers, Estimators, Project Engineers, Assistant Project Managers, Project Managers), and not the ‘field personnel’ (Superintendents and Foremen). The second is a pull-planning meeting attended by the superintendents and foremen of the General Contractor (G.C) and Trade Contractors. The third is a Mechanical Electrical & Plumbing (MEP) coordination meeting attended by office and, rarely, field personnel. All three meetings are facilitated by the G.C.

The first two weeks of observation revealed that the sub-contractors were having trouble coordinating amongst themselves. All the required participants weren’t present at the meetings, the format of meetings was frequently changes, concerned were left unaddressed, and meeting facilitation from the G.C left much to desire. This was aggravated by the G.C disinviting the more vocal sub-contractors (Mechanical, Electrical and Plumbing) from the

planning meeting. They stated that the MEP could wait as the concrete and drywall sub-contractors planned their work.

Quite often, it was seen that meetings attendees did not have the authority to make binding decisions. This resulted in a drawn-out game of guesswork where discussions became stale and circuitous, in the absence of a decision-making authority. The traditional power structure remained ingrained by force of habit, and meetings morphed into status-updating routines rather than work sessions. The compounding of waiting time led to eroding trust in the authority's decision making abilities.

Furthermore, in interviews, the G.C was described as exhibiting non-committal and decision delaying behavior. Specifically, a lack of authority from the G.Cs on clash detection and work planning was mentioned. The sub-contractors were coordinating among themselves, outside of these coordination meetings. Their authority is limited to digital clash detection and elimination, and have no agency on design decisions that need to be made when clashes arise. There is no resolution of conflicts as they are bumped from one meeting to another. This results in the overwhelming feeling of *'the G.C just leaving it to the sub-contractors'*.

Sub-contractors routinely refuse to attend this pull-planning meeting, stating that *"There's nothing to talk about, it's not in the contract"*. Certain times, when an absence is questioned it is uncovered that, despite multiple requests, the necessary participants weren't explicitly invited to meetings. This leads to great lengths of time being spent waiting for participants to gather, leading to further disgruntlement. When a participant arrives to at a meeting on time and is being told to wait – *"You've given up actual work you could be doing on-site in order to do nothing"*. Upon being asked what he expects from the pull-planning meeting as he headed to it, a forman says – *"Nothing. I'm not motivated, just doing my job."* – alluding to deteriorating optimism in the utility of these planning processes.

Analysis of fieldwork data

With the lean planning tools and demands to collaborate, the project was certainly encouraging cooperation. The argument being made in this paper is about *how* this is done through practice and discourse and the implications it has for valuing and de-valuing of worker characteristics. By analyzing discourse and reactions to it, we gain an understanding of the types of demands being made of individuals. The paragraphs below outline *how* an ideal subject is crafted as having specific characteristics. i.e., a subject does the following:

1. Supports and participates in collaborative planning
2. Cooperates for the benefit of the project
3. Requires minimum intervention

The text in italics is verbatim notes from interviews, observations and fieldnotes about conversations. The regular text is my analysis of the empirical material. Note: In an attempt to preserve participants' voices, the original quotes from meetings and interviews have been inserted, which include masculine banter and profanity. However, the unpacking of the gendered nature of the discourse and the subject it produces is out of the scope of this paper and will be engaged in the future.

1. Subject openly participates in collaborative planning

Participation is pitched as opening up a platform or voice for the sub-contractors (specifically superintendents and foremen). Consequently, there are new understandings being forged about who is permitted to attend and speak at meetings. This is explicitly, and quite bluntly, vocalized by the general contractor at a pull planning meeting. But it is clearly out of the norm and reacted to with jokes from the upper management of the sub-contractors.

MEP sub PM says loudly: "Let's use duct tape to identify who doesn't get to speak!"

GC Superintendent: "why don't you guys just let the guys actually doing the work talk"

Anyone that doesn't see participation in collaborative planning as necessary is described as living in a rosy period of nostalgia or unconcerned about efficiency. In a golden age of technology and collaboration in construction, the last thing you want to be seen as is outdated, stubborn and ignorant.

"There sometimes seems to be a nostalgia of a type of construction. We used to figure it out in the field but you need to have some type of way of bringing together all these moving pieces, buildings are far too complicated. If there was this magical time where things are just figured out in the field then I'm sure it was wrought with a lot of waste and things were just not as, you know exciting or aggressive in complexity of design."—Project Manager, MEP sub-contractor

Following in this line, a subject must be willing to share details about their work process and schedule freely. They must also be comfortable with questioning and being questioned. If not, there is justifiable skepticism about what they are hiding. They must be committed enough to the project goals to share information that their company leadership might have instructed them to keep private.

"It requires a different mindset in the openness about these things rather than just saying "I need two weeks to do my work. Two weeks is the norm in construction, "How long is it going to take"? "Two weeks". You got two light bulbs, "How long is it going to take"? "Two weeks". That's the way that you know, CPM scheduling goes, just a big block of time. No one knows what you're doing when you're there; it's just a date, you're working to the date. So you can go take a vacation for 10 days and then come back and screw in the light bulb for two days, you made your day."—Project Manager, MEP sub-contractor

This rhetoric paints work processes as black boxes that are concealing buffers that rightfully belong to the project to exploit. This practice of demanding open book process activates a superintendent's reaction of *"it's driving me nuts"* which typecasts him as someone insecure, uncooperative or rude. He also expresses frustration with the practice as it can seem probing and non-trusting. A foreman expresses similar sentiments on feeling policed through the software and meeting practices that stem from it:

"I don't know that it's conducive to putting shit behind you rapid enough right now. It's great to get ahead of stuff. I'm a little behind right now. And every fucking time we gotta go sit and change the plan again, and do this, and argue about hey – who – come here. Did you do this? Did you do that? That drives me nuts. It drives me nuts. Just fucking do it. Sticky notes on a wall will not build this fucking building."—MEP Foreman

The planning software is seen as representing distrust and meddling in the natural organizing methods of experienced builders, some of whom have decades of on-site training and yet are now faced with a software that controls their work. This is seen as *"looking over the shoulder"* and is demoralizing since it is not accompanied with adequate support, training, and forums to be truly heard. The largely public demands on status updates on tasks are seen as infantilizing and frustrating.

The "I need, I give" mentality of clarity and pure exchange is off-putting to this veteran whose flexible and informal modes of organizing are being formalized in this structured manner (See section 2 below). Moreover, multi-skilled labor is valued. It is not enough to be an expert in one's own field, but a subject must display a willingness to expand the boundaries of their knowledge for the benefit of project goals.

"You have to be is inquisitive. A person that wants to understand the inner workings of every bit. I mean there's a lot of people that love their work and their specialty or are quite content with just knowing their specialty. [...] person that wants to

really understand what does it take to do everything from laying carpet to tying in steel.” – GC superintendent/Lean coach

However, being “inquisitive” is not always encouraged or appreciated. There is discomfort in being challenged, stemming largely from a history of litigation and strict jurisdictional boundaries. Even when this transparency and curiosity is embraced, the general contractors still retain control over what is “desirable” questioning, and what/who can be questioned. The legitimacy of trade input and the validity of tacit knowledge are continually contested.

“There was a situation where we provided our input on a waterproofing detail that uh we had seen go horribly wrong multiple times on multiple projects. The architect didn’t want to listen to our input, the coordination facilitators really didn’t understand why we were pressing this issue and the thing is that it wasn’t something that was necessarily in our scope but we saw that it was wrong and I can’t just stand by, throw my hands up and say “You know what” you guys are going to do this wrong and you know, we’ll laugh at you in a year when it’s failing. No that’s not the right way to do it.” –Project Manager, MEP sub-contractor

The “problem” person is often used as a joke – “*Angry birds on your iPad! You’re not being a team player!*”. This idea of a team player can easily be deployed to bring workers back within the program when they start to toe the line. This labelling conveniently avoids the question of what is a problem for the problem person themselves, as described in this paper.

2. Subject cooperates (i.e., takes on risk) for the benefit of the project

The cooperation necessarily entails the formalization of informal relationships. The conventional system of getting work done through informal barter, sharing and intimidation is replaced by formalized requirements to do so. According to the field personnel, in traditional construction work settings, there is a clear emphasis on informal reciprocity. Your ability and cooperation determined your reputation and were your currency for bargaining/getting favors. This worldview involved expecting challenges, expecting trust to be broken and the mightier reputation or shoe size to be the preferred tools of collaboration. The superintendents and foremen recounted navigating being in charge, influencing decisions with fights and then bartering beers for favors. The software and meeting aided planning in the presence of general contractors is seen as a practice that breaks the messy networks of relationships on a construction site and the bonds built on the physical experience of sweat and blood in putting a building up. This planning is seen as limiting agency or requiring a “beer-sharing level” of commitment without necessitating the relationship building.

Moreover, the prestige and honor of working on this project is offered to erase all the other minor inconveniences and hurdles that the team needs to get over. Centering project goals and staying positive through the many changes is valued. This is deployed through the running theme of “*the right thing to do regardless of cost*”. This moral positioning crafts a reasonable and generous team player, while anyone who doesn’t play by these rules can be painted as uncooperative or selfish. Such a subject positioning works by using a self-righteous rhetoric that valorizes this “civilized” way of working.

“Well I think one of the toughest things currently that I’m dealing with is a lack of the overall picture with different personalities [...] and just forgetting that we’re here to work on a world class facility and it’s a unique opportunity. [...] a lot of times we get bogged down with the day to day trivialities of commercial terms you know, competing interest, blockheadedness about having to go back and rework something in the fourth or fifth time just to get it right. Reminding our team to stay positive, and people that were outside of our team to stay positive. If people don’t stay positive I’m not sure how people could work every day. –Project Manager, MEP sub-contractor

Using the language of friendly cooperation and loosening of “rules” makes the workers who refuse to do that seem “*stubborn-headed or backward*”. The contractual document that is

supposed to govern the project is cast aside as an impediment to the successful completion of the project. Instead, the workers are asked to comply with “*the right way to do things*” and “*global success*”, which are defined by the General Contractor based on the completion and profitability of the project. The collective rhetoric used here disguises the fact that it is the right way to do things if commercial success of the project is the goal.

“if there is a tough job that comes up people resort to the traditional commercial construction attitudes of “What’s in the contract”, “That’s not in my scope”, “That’s not in your scope” rather than taking a step back and saying “Let’s put the document aside for a second here. Let’s think about the right way to do it and then figure out how to bring the document back into the fold so that we’re successful globally”. That continual process of people being bogged down by what’s on the piece of paper is a problem.” –Project Manager, MEP sub-contractor

However, this “cooperation above all else” imperative can have isolating and limiting effects. The project goals can often be at loggerheads with sub-team or personal goals. These ultimate goals reflect the capitalist enterprise’s priorities of maximizing profit (also termed as “value”) and minimizing cost. And crafting the ultimate goals of the project do not require the input of the superintendents and foremen, as they are brought on board to execute and, limitedly, design within a pre-constructed box. For example, the field personnel see cooperation and team playing as equivalent to being asked to stretch the boundaries of your responsibilities. This seems unreasonable and is felt to be a betrayal – “*you shouldn’t be letting him do that to me*”.

“I’m a disciplined guy. I’m not going to be fucking told. I never have been told. I won’t be told. I cooperate. I’m a team player. I’m abrasive. I’m direct. I’m confident. And that’s what I’m here for. I’ve worked for people that have told me hey, don’t fucking say that to him no more. Don’t talk to that superintendent anymore. And I tell them well then do your fucking job and I wouldn’t have to. Until you do your job, I’m gonna continue to tell him no. It’s not in the fucking contract. It’s not in the schedule. “But that’s not your job to tell him that, (name of foreman)!”. Yeah, I know. It’s your fucking job. So why is he out there trying to get me to do shit outside the schedule. You shouldn’t be letting him do that to me. That’s your job. Do your fucking job and I won’t do your job for you!” MEP Foreman

3. Subject requires minimal intervention

The field personnel tended to see management as laying claim to the labor already in circulation. There was explicit derision for the role of the GC as a documenter who controls the artifact produced out of the tapped labor of the subcontractors. The GC role is seen as converting the nuanced discourse, the physical energy trapped in the words on the board, and erasing the anxieties, complexities and frustration to punch into a system or simply take a transient picture only to start over again. Accusations ranged from the “*GC as uncaring*” to the “*GC as a risk-shifter*”. They were criticized for filling their ever expanding administrative role, a huge component of that was minimizing the level of work they did themselves, both in direct work and in surveillance.

“It’s a big change that’s happened in general contracting, you know, over the last ten years. Ask anybody in the field. They’ll tell you that, any field guy. GCs have no responsibilities. All they do is stand in our way as a buffer between you and the client, you know. “- MEP Foreman

In response to this, sub-contractors would often self-organize to equip themselves with the resources necessary to make progress. You are expected to find a way to meet your commitments, or get out of the way. There is no sympathy for excuses, and no proactive encouragement for finding solutions.

We also see sub-contractors actively trying to go to meetings where they weren't invited to- "*big fan of crashing meetings*". This produces them as nosy (as in the waterproofing meetings described earlier) and excludes segments who can visibly be identified as out of place. It implicitly includes those in the know about when meetings are happening and those who have foresight to know if something will affect them. The gatekeeping strategy is that by making it known that this meeting will not pertain to you. It's often more than gatekeeping, and tends towards active uprooting during meetings. This is a control mechanism needing minimal oversight since the decisions of who is relevant and needed rests with the GC. However, sub-contractors subvert this control by send invites to each other, creating fringe spaces, sharing information, and crashing meetings – ultimately producing the desired "cooperative" work, but on their own turf.

It is important to note here that in this setting, the GC retained control of inputs, outputs, and adjustments to the planning software, i.e., they played the role of the gatekeeper while simultaneously reiterating that the superintendents and the foremen are the real planners in the room. The technical expertise was a justifiable excuse used to lock the superintendents and foremen out of being able to touch the schedule. They were merely supposed to provide the tacit information that is typically inaccessible to the general contractor. Frustration with the GC's inaction and their ability to use the planning software and materials produced as justification and obfuscation of the stoppage of work outside.

Additionally, there are masculine motifs proudly on display in the offices and trailers. Posters that mimic complaint forms are on display declaring that you shouldn't rat out your fellow workers, if you do, you are a "sissy man" and if you are perpetrators of hurt, you are a "real man". Implying that things should be sorted out on the field without interference from a manager or a parenting figure who takes reports on what happened to whom. An aversion to interventionism and cooperating with management which was captured in a searing comment made to one of the sub-contracting quality surveyors who returned unsuccessfully from a caucus with the GC - "*did they slap you and send you back, I thought you spoke for us*". In line with this, there are active efforts to stay clear of management and provide minimal information.

MEP Foreman (sub) tells me he called "our guy" at the GC and told him that we have "a ton of crane and piping coming in next week, and there's only one fellow who don't know about it."

GC asks- "Who?"

MEP Foreman says – "You."

They even manage to make their self-organizing look like cooperation, while actually weaponizing their assets by timing them strategically.

Structural subs refused to attend this meeting several times earlier, saying there's nothing to talk about, it's not in the contract. Attended today, possibly to send a CO to the GC later. Structures dont cooperate. VP (MEP sub) will wait for GC to receive the CO and realize they have a \$2M problem, and then offer the crane to GC so it'll be a favor to GC rather than to Structures.

CONCLUSION & FUTURE WORK

A particular type of worker is crafted through the practices – the subject is free and flexible, yet governable. The new kind of power apparatus (security) co-exists with older form (discipline). A potential positive may be that work can be reoriented towards greater worker control over tools of production if profits are shared down the chain. A more likely downside

is the rendering invisible of management-worker conflict by seemingly aligning their interests. This prevents workers from organizing with solidarity around broader systems of oppression. This has implications for flailing organized labor since first line supervisors (foremen and superintendents) are the conduits for union busting. As described in this paper, they are increasingly pulled into the managerial tasks and spaces. The collaborative practices attempt to replace the adversarial relationship between labor and capital with one of cooperation. This move has a long history in weakening organized labor in the United States, and will be described by my future work in greater detail.

REFERENCES

<will be included in final draft>