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## Going Underground: Merging Collaboration with Micro-Resistance

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# Going Underground: Merging Collaboration with Micro-Resistance

Christine Schwarz \*

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**Abstract:** »In den Untergrund gehen: das Verschmelzen von Kooperation und Widerstand«. This article connects insights about the dynamics of resistance from sociology of critique with critical management research. This connection will highlight that silent and hardly visible forms of protest need more attention from social research. Taking an interview sequence as a source, aspects of analyzing micro-resistance are developed. Explanations and justifications of how to deal with management practices show a coexistence of both, resistance and collaboration. The ensuing kind of identity regulation obviously makes management systems work together with individuals who try to stay capable of action. These insights challenge established concepts of critique in social research.

**Keywords:** Critical management research, resistance, qualitative social research.

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## 1. When Something Rejected Becomes Normal

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The main problem of critical sociology is its inability to understand the critical operations undertaken by the actors. (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 364)

Universities seem to be burdened by several processes of performance measurement: benefit based funding, target agreements, different kinds of evaluations and (enforced) competition. On the one hand those managerially inspired solutions can often cause new problems, like being flooded by reporting duties, which absorb a lot of resources for organizations. On the other hand exactly this complexity and uncertainty offers a range of possibilities to react and rethink, including the various styles of coproducing and resistance. The aim of the article is to trace ideas of micro-resistance as a silent and barely visible form of protest vital for the new public management.

While conducting a research interview<sup>1</sup> about performance management in universities, I asked a professor, how he and his colleagues would compare each

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<sup>1</sup> The design of the research project was a qualitative case study within seven German universities. Beside document analysis and participative observation interviews were conducted as guided interviews with experts and narrative interviews with teachers, researchers as well as administrative personnel. The material was interpreted mainly through content analysis and in parts documentary method and through objective hermeneutics. The project was fi-

other in everyday life. In times of post-new public management it was not surprising that in his answer he pointed to many of the recently officially established indicators: quantity of publications, third-party funds, salary classes, and number of staff, rooms, and students. He almost finished his report by pointing out: "Naturally I am comparing myself to others in looking onto the publication list." But then all of a sudden the interviewee stopped, looked thoughtful and said, slowly: "But the most interesting thing is: While answering your question I said three times 'naturally'!"<sup>2</sup> "Why does it feel natural?" I pushed myself to ask and he immediately declared: "Obviously for me comparing has become normal!"

Here we are offered an interesting normative dilemma: on the one hand the interviewee perceives measurement as natural; on the other hand he feels this normalization is artificial. He is not only moaning about the sense of new public management as many do. He complains about both the change within his working environment as well as his way of thinking about and dealing with it. At first glance this is neither critique nor conflict. But this anecdotal empirical case highlights some aspects about critique. In following the interview sequence in the next chapter, we can see that categories of critique and conflict should be reviewed with different theoretical lenses.

After we have become familiar with the interviewees' discontent (2) we will examine three theoretical perspectives on critique (3). Being sensitized for diverse scientific forms of dealing with conflict shaping social change we might learn from our empirical starting point, the scientist who is perplexed by himself, for further research on the relation of micro-resistance and critique (4).

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## 2. What Is the Problem with Performance Management? Play and Reject the Game!

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Of all of the forty-five people from higher education staff we interviewed only one dean did not criticize the system of performance management at all. All others presented a bundle of reasons<sup>3</sup> against performance management, everybody in their unique assortment. "The system," as it is addressed in most of the interviews, nowadays stands for a very common practice of distributing money

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nanced from the German Federal Ministry of Education (funding line "Leistungsbewertung in der Wissenschaft").

<sup>2</sup> For the number crunchers among us: indeed he used this word 5 times in the short interview sequence and 11 times in the whole one hour interview.

<sup>3</sup> Most common official critiques on performance management are that indicators often do not measure what they should, or that they cannot be generalized to all disciplines. It is also argued that they do not prove to be incentive for more or better performance. Either these systems open up unfair competition or they spoil the alma mater with bureaucracy and paper or computer work. In addition they bear the danger of a false guarantee of knowledge about *relevant* differences of performance – at least for the vast majority of the interviewees.

for performance indicators, like publications or third-party funds. Almost everyone interviewed argued that on the one hand standardized regulation is inevitable and without any alternative; on the other hand they all expressed a need to distance themselves from these measurement tools, sometimes so much so that “the system” has become a passionately criticized topic. So almost all of our case study interviews represent special hybrid mixtures of tolerance and critique. I would like to focus on the cited scientist, who I would like to call henceforth Peter, because he displays something that is not very often revealed in social research: a short comment from somebody who is not pleased about his behavior of critique. The following presentation of the interview sequence will reconstruct via content analysis how he explains his balancing of semi-accepting change.

This is something I really think about often [...]. We all join in reproducing this game [...]. If you are forced to play a game, then you are *within* the game. I cannot go in fundamental opposition all of the time. That's too hard and almost nobody can stand this. Then processes of cognitive dissonance arise.

It is his own diction that provokes Peter's self-reflection. As a scientist, whose job might be seen as being able to at least explain things – he tries to offer an explanation for the status of ‘not really being persuaded of performance management but also cooperating with it.’ When finding oneself in a permanent “cognitive dissonance” the behavior of others arises as point of reference.

You, yourself, have to say things that you cannot stand for, not in this sharpness anyhow. Sometimes other colleagues start using these performance indicators and then, step by step, you find yourself believing the system a little bit!

The process of “believing the system” is described as an interactive but also personal way of self-convincing. But simultaneously there remains a small process of self-protection of dignity. He justifies his disbelief in the felt need for distance:

Is it right or wrong? I don't know, but I must admit I do it. But for me personally, on the other side I can only stand this by sidestepping and asking myself: what kind of insanity is this?

After this mental sidestepping he feels himself to be forced to go back to the “game.” He describes the prospect of possibly jumping off again later to make it bearable to be a player, at least for a while:

So from time to time I need to refuse rankings! [...] Things should be transparent without doubt [...]. But I cannot give commitment to this game! I don't want it! My feeling is: if I play the game I have to be committed to it.

In partly refusing the game without danger or loss of face (e.g. when it is possible to refuse your success data and in consequence resign extra bonus money) Peter refuses his “commitment” to the game in public. Playing the game but without commitment seems a good compromise for him, when feeling to be forced to do so and agree to something that is in his and his colleagues' eyes “insane.”

Our interviewee creates the interesting term “self-socialization” for what he does with himself when he occasionally accepts to play the game.

So if I want to avoid those processes of self-socialization, well, we can only try to ease them. We cannot step out of the game, we professors profit from the system, and abundantly so. And so at least we have to play it in parts. [...] I cannot say I would be ambivalent, no I cannot. It is like this: in one moment I play the game. Then in the next I go out and say: what kind of a game is this? Then I start to discuss the rules of the game. But I haven't made them!

In decoupling or temporarily fragmenting playing time from non-playing time he dissociates himself from what he labels as “ambivalence” – which is also to be avoided. Being ambivalent is perhaps a mode of being disrupted or shilly-shallying, in any case of not being capable of making decisions or being seen as not mature. He describes himself as being oppressed but also playing an active role to regain control again. It seems that in his justification of his way of playing “the game,” of making performance measurable, he turns the game upside down: The system pressures him, but it is he who decides whether to take part or not. At least this mental sidestepping is described as a relief for him.

His remarks about who has made the “rules of the game” open up a new subject: who is responsible for the rules and their need to be changed? We can see that he not only refuses his thorough commitment but also denies being responsible for re-shaping the rules of the game. Peter is not engaged enough in the game to change the rules or officially questioning them. Demonstrating his – at least at certain times in the game and at least verbally – absence is obviously necessary for him.

Now we could doubt that what the interviewee says is valid and ask for the real facts regarding his behavior and the university he is working for. Maybe he tells us only a sugar-coated story to protect his standing as a successful man with (still) good manners. But what we have seen is that he obviously feels a need for some mental techniques to make himself fit for “the system,” to bear the system in a mode of resistance and collaboration. This way of making yourself work with performance management can be translated into two formulas to handle this normative dilemma with an on- and off-identification with the “game”-membership:

- a) Although I join the game, I am not completely committed and a piece of me is saved. (resistance)
- b) As those who benefit from playing the game, I can at least co-decide when I take a break. (collaboration)

What makes Peter's case relevant for the examination of critique and change is *not* how he tries to arrange himself with conditions that are not considered as legitimate. Role conflicts have been discussed sufficiently as internal and external disputes (Goffman 1956) in everyday-life. People are always confronted with bundles of expectation and are therefore forced to set priorities. Even Peter has to decide how he prefers to present himself in the interview as self-

confident colleague, who never avoids being measured with others, or as intelligent scientist, who critically takes a stand on something that he identifies as distorting reductionism of himself personally.

Sociology and psychology are full of hints for people's dissociation in situations of conflict or discontent to maintain social order (i.e. Leithäuser and Volmerg 1988; Simmel 1917). In critical theory the term "dual socialisation" (Becker-Schmidt 2008) has been established to illustrate how the constitution of subject happens, namely as balancing multiple, often contradictory relations of power (like economic structures and gender hierarchy). The permanent need to bridge diverse expectations can be more or less conscious and therefore how people behave in contexts of diverse expectations it is not a real decision: whether to follow or to change conventions or at least to challenge them.

The central aim of this article is to explore micro-resistant behavior as a border area between identity claims and social demands. This is particularly relevant for university research as it mainly focuses on the governance of higher education on a macro level (Enders, Kehm and Schimank 2015; Gläser et al. 2010; Gläser and Laudel 2016; Pruisken 2017, in this volume). An understanding of how the social change of universities is sustained, through a critique on a micro-level of self-regulation, would help to fill this research gap and widen institutional research. A broad conceptual and theoretical analysis of resistance is still outstanding (Schulz 2014; Schwarz and Struhkamp 2007), but would contribute to the question of why new public management is still held to be the only future.

What makes the case interesting for our study is his irritation about observing himself in partially assimilating the rationality of the new performance management that aims to change the university system. He explicitly articulates his discontent about the way he talks and tries to justify the system as well as his way of dealing with it.

We could go on observing how the interviewee voices his critique of being measured in the rest of the interview or what his colleagues said about the system and him. We could also analyze his shifting between "I" and "we" – which can be analyzed as another technique of his on- and off-identification with the group of professors. But for our question about the role of critique in changing systems we already have enough empirical substance from this interview sequence as a starting point for theoretical reflection. The next chapter will bring some relevant streams of social research on critique and identity together.

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### 3. Inquiring Critique and Social Order

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From the sociology of critique we can learn how change can be understood in analyzing this "critical capacity" (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 2011) of peo-



ple. Peter has become an illustrator of this capacity when he is sure that something is “wrong.” His normative orientations are covered with narratives of (de-)legitimation in his thoughts. For Boltanski and Thévenot the key aspect of sociology is to grasp how relations of equivalence succeed or fail when people try to translate them to other contexts. Within these hidden orientations (of what is compared and in which aspects) we can surmise relations of equivalence addressed by the interviewee in the rest of the interview as: equality vs. particularity, me as an individual vs. me as a member of a group, and solidarity vs. abandonment. The sociology of conflict shows that “critical moments” always have potential to create change in the sense of a new order or an order that becomes illegitimate and therefore undergoes transition. “The main problem of critical sociology is its inability to understand the critical operations undertaken by the actors” (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 364). The authors achieved attention for their contribution to get closer to critique in making justifications readable as affirmation and neglect of different regimes of orders. When people justify or criticize they choose a “regime” for a specific situation: Peter refuses to become “insane” as he classifies the game as crazy. So the very option of conflict and protest is grounded in the existence and competition of different regimes of justification that can be chosen.

While trying to make sense of the shifting through “make-believe” he catches himself justifying a system he criticizes. In following his justification and self-reflection we can observe his irritation at the normality of being measured and ranked and he starts to compare performance management as a “game” about which he is not convinced.

Is this a case of somebody who blockades change because as a part-time-player he refuses public protest? In Peter’s mental techniques shown above, “real conflict” has been levelled out and compromise takes place as an internal process. Conflicts are internalized and do not provoke critical moments as a resource for change or at least action. But then our analytical question would change into what can be classified as “real conflict.” In the terms of Boltanski and Thévenot, Peter does not disturb the implementation of a new order – but in blocking his own critique he is refusing to contribute to optimizing the new system.

The reflective astonishment of watching resistance going on beneath the surface (and into the underground of what can be perceived by others) is a real challenge for sociology! We obviously miss adequate categories for conflict to aggregate these scarcely visible struggles of commitment with and against “the system” (cf. Adloff and Pfaller 2017, in this volume). At least in traditional categories of “conflict” real effects for organizational change would arise only if either Peter would accept and play the game in proper *or* resist in public. In the view of Boltanski and Thévenot the system would only get nutrient for betterment in the latter case.

The energy for changing the system might have gone somewhere seldom recognized in current approaches of analyzing management – either in materialis-

tic or idealistic preferences. But we can follow it to where the urges of resistance and collaboration are negotiated more closely. The next chapters will offer interpretations of three selected theoretical approaches with a stronger awareness for what dwells between the dichotomy of resistance and collaboration.

### 3.1 Authorizing Representational Acts: Subscribing to Performance Management

Looking at performance management as a production process of representations of performance reminds us of what has been described very precisely in Science and Technology Studies (STS). When the production of symbols and numbers to represent ‘real’ performance is seen as a representational act of transforming, the system can no longer be held as an objectifying machine. Instead it is a procedure of imprinting that people undergo. So what counts as a relevant distinction or difference can be seen as an “inscription” (Latour 1987) of priorities made by others. And these inscriptions (made impersonal by “the system”) authorize the indicators of – formerly our – performance. For this reason, Actor Network Theory (ANT) claims the “nonhuman entities” should be regarded as powerful agents, which can be investigated first of all by the work of social scientists (Latour and Woolgar 1979). It is important to note that differences between subjects are not denied here. Most importantly the process of the construction of differences highlights specific aspects and dims others. So representational practices are powerful acts. In Callon and Latour’s words it is necessary to focus on the representational signs, or nonhuman actants, because:

Since differences are so visible, what needs to be understood is their construction, their transformations, their remarkable variety and mobility, in order to substitute a multiplicity of little local divides for one great divide. We do not deny differences; we refuse to consider them a priori and to hierarchize them once and for all. (Callon and Latour 1992, 356)

So the act of representation – that is often seen as constitutional for modern society (Latour 1993, also Foucault 1976) – lies at the heart of the new performance management. The social technology of performance management replaces trust by numbers and experts by automatisms. This seems to be the fundamental logic that has to be accepted even if there are still a huge number of misrepresentations and unintended consequences addressed by the opponents. From the view of history of science and technology it remains only a small “strategic position of shaping the new technology rather than opposing it head on” (Weingart 2015, 249), which is occupied by “reflective pragmatists,” who craft and criticize these tools and are keen to keep on improving them.

With performance management the organization defines which differences are relevant and which are not. The organization demands or assumes agreement for a representation of the performance from its members. When performance management is established as an accepted tool, it is supposed that mem-

bers agree with those practices and that they will use performance indicators not only for organizational needs but also for their own purposes, e.g. reputation. So making differences in general is a way of communicating “social identities” (as shown as well as criticized e.g. by Judith Butler or Donna Haraway and many others), which can be understood as characteristics of self-concepts of a person or a group.

But for Peter, who is not a creator of the system but one of the system receivers, the situation is a very personal one. On the one hand he is forced to decide whether he agrees or disagrees with the translation of his performance into an authorized representation of his work. On the other hand his way of copying the justification of the indicators as given, or in Peter’s word “naturally,” alarms him, because he articulates doubts about these measurements. Can his adoption of the indicator as a valid measurement be understood as a consequence of his authorization of the representational act? And can his irritation about his way of naturalizing this confirmation be interpreted as an effort to defend his discomfort about this representational act while still authorizing it?

Peter’s tolerance of the system is assessed as compliance with the whole set of values of the system. It is this normative dilemma, which obviously has to be cultivated permanently, that Peter inspects for some seconds almost as an observer. This case illustrates the problems that arise when the organization tries to separate job performance from a map or symbol of performance. If you agree to this process of copying you agree to the change of the social order and its inscriptions of what is relevant and what is not. This inscription reaches for a subscription of the new order of recognition (long publication list = good scientist) that officially determines the relation between you and your performance pictured by “the system.” This relation between ‘activity’ and ‘picture of activity’ can never be congruent and for the one being measured or pictured this incongruence can have advantageous or disadvantageous effects. This can be tolerated as only an external label or used for reputational management. But during that representational act (or when Peter realizes 1. that pictures have been taken and 2. that he does not really agree with that), contexts of his activity or performance are black-boxed. It is his very subjective achievement how he handles this reduction, or in his words “insanity,” and how he manages to maintain his ability to act (this is what has been also described in literature as subjectification of work).

The new routines of coupling the activities of Peter to the established indicators affects his claims of identity, reformatting the conditions of recognition and stimulating interactive negotiations about social order among the members of “the system.” The organization calls for an activity-oriented attention towards the indicators: members should start managing their activity along the social orders of performance indicators for a better reputation of their image and of the image of the organization.

From the perspective of STS Peter's reaction can be read both as a form of internalizing control but in the same way protecting his internal value system that is not compatible with the formalized indicators. Peter subscribes to the inscription of: 'a good scientist is somebody with a long publication list.' And in an internal process he withdraws this subscription.

As plausible as STS-perspectives prove here, they do not help adequately to show how people develop competences in dealing with this permanent switch between permitting and forbidding management, as well as related identity claims.

### 3.2 Micro-Resistance: Downsizing Categories of Conflict?

Taking the described notion of (un)subscribing to management as a kind of twilight zone for conflict and change, it is fruitful to relate this knowledge a little closer to what has been displayed by "Critical Management Studies" (CMS) since the early 1990s.

CMS calls for a kind of fusion of critical theory (by which they address the 'Frankfurt School'), post-structuralism, and post-marxism. These professional critics came together for management research as they agreed with the contemporary diagnosis inspired by Foucault, that social research cannot improve management for the purpose of humanity and ecology. From this point of view social change produces an increasing density of contradictory settings that renegotiate conditions of subjectivity. The only thing research can do is call into question the "wisdom" of management in general (Alvesson and Willmott 2003) by pointing out that management claims to be neutral but in fact is thoroughly political and technocratic. No matter if we are convinced by this approach of critical research, it might be helpful to consult the ideas of "micro-resistance" and "micro-emancipation" that are some of the outputs of this controversial CMS-discourse. For the setting of Peter's solution for his dilemma it points at least in directions that could make forms of discontent and dealing with contradictions a little more recognizable.

The concept of micro-resistance is obviously inspired by Foucault (1972, 1976, 1977), even if he has not created it. In the context of CMS authors often relate to his work, especially to his book on "Power / Knowledge" and his concept of "Microphysics of Power" which describes subtle mechanisms of social disciplining beneath macro structures like dominance and violence. With "micro-emancipation" Alvesson and Willmott (1996) describe how members of organizations get more scopes for arranging their working practices, although it might be set by others with a greater extent, (e.g. with formalized parameters). It was introduced by the authors for two reasons: to give an answer to post-structuralist critique on critical theory, "to avoid the nihilistic tendencies within post-structuralism" (Alvesson and Willmott 1992, 460) but also to "emphasise the relevance and significance of another level and another type of emancipa-

tory action, which is less visible and less grandiose” (446). With this “downscaling” (ibid.) the authors tried to introduce an understanding of emancipation and resistance, that is “less ambitious,” otherwise it would not be possible to hold on to society and organizations being criticizable.

The crucial point for Alvesson and Willmott is to understand how identity and its regulation are linked with emancipation and every-day-interaction. The authors explain it this way:

Micro-emancipation [...] means resistance to stratagems deployed in efforts to fix people’s identities and self-understandings. [...] Micro-emancipation occurs when critical reflection enables the development of an open attitude to the ascription of identity in which the negative (e.g. subordination to certain norms and self-constraints) as well as the positive (e.g. status confirmation) aspects of the use of the term ‘manager’ are acknowledged and explored. At the core of micro-emancipation in this particular example, then is the consideration of resistance to the power technique of defining another person in a certain way. A small-scale liberation is encouraged – as a response to a specific move of power (temporary fixation of identity) – not a more ambitious call for transformation of the situation (and the organizational content) into a full-scale democratization. The latter is not inconsistent with, but falls outside, the idea of micro-emancipation. In this light, emancipation is seen as an element in everyday life. (Alvesson and Willmott 1996, 173)

So micro-emancipation emerges when ‘wrong’ identities are addressed.

These efforts of re-conceptualizing emancipation and resistance have been contested, although for different reasons and motivations. One strand of critique on micro-emancipation argues the search for traces of only *micro*-resistance is only one for “decaf resistance” (Contu 2008, 274) and complains that it would not be needed for social action. Another skeptical reply with more analytical focus is that we now have the opposite problem: everything can be seen as conflict:

Then we come to a point where we see resistance in nearly each informal behaviour of the employees. Daily routines, humour, irony, jokes, sexual games, gender base, psychoanalytic paths or cynicism became the new fields of resistant power to be observed and to flow away. (Fleming and Spicer 2008, in: Alakavuklar and Cakar 2012, 1)

The authors explicitly intend to clarify that emancipation is something that becomes apparent in everyday life (Alvesson and Willmott 1996, 173). So as we might risk loosening a precise concept of resistance, what is achieved by looking at a “less grandiose” resistance is a greater attention for fractions of identity constructions: that a non-resister in former categories must not be a follower and that conflict is displaced to individual regulation. Illustrating micro-resistance bears the potential to reconstruct how people navigate within an order of recognition that is brittle because although this order is partly tolerated, it is not accepted at all – or feels wrong in recurring situations.

So identity managers are very active: They contribute to organizational control by identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott 2002, 638). We can gain from the view of “Identity Regulation as Organizational Control: Producing the Appropriate Individual” (2002) a broader perspective on normative control through identity or reputational work, that also opens up spaces of freedom and “micro-emancipation” so that both feel appropriate: self-perception and organizational order. Identity regulation can be regarded as a creative rewriting of given patterns of identity: “people are continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002, 626, see also 2003). What is performed by identity regulation is a protection of self-esteem through changing conditions of recognition as a balance between “Perspektivität und Patchwork” (Wagner 2000).

If we look at the interview sequence from the perspective of identity regulation we can see how Peter does what he is expected to do under conditions of formalized performance management and at the same time protects his self-respect. The representational act produces pain or at least discomfort and also expresses the need for recognition: “Naturally” I am against the system of performance management, but in fact I contribute to the system. In his mode of justification he can experience himself as successful in neither being mainstream, as following a standard mode of conduct, nor anti-mainstream as deviation. This helps to stay capable for action – with a remarkable amount of internal activity – in a way that integrates the two playing Peters, but which is not honored by the system at all because it is stored in the underground.

Those processes of micro-resistance are most of the time disregarded by social research maybe because the actor is seen as passive or because no organizational effects can be found as a harvest. But from the viewpoint of self-regulation individuals are very active and busy in “thinking a lot” as Peter has expressed it. It can be questioned if this is resistance at all when it is no ‘real’ resistance. So if the empirical evidence of control being internalized obviously calls for a downsized concept of conflict and critique, I suggest defining micro-resistance as an individual regulation of conflict between collaboration and resistance.

So no matter if we prefer to handle the analysis of critique and resistance with or without caffeine, in Peter’s case we can observe that micro-resistance can function as self-protection as well as self-contamination from management scripts. If we qualify his on-and-off-identification with the game as micro-resistance or micro-emancipation then these concepts can function as indicators for situations or relations that are held for unjustified and marked by different shades of discontent and its several layers of counter-discourse.

A concrete concept of micro-resistance does not exist yet. But there are some works about the micro-politics of resistance that go along with what Alvesson and Willmott have suggested with their concepts of micro-resistance

and identity regulation. Some of those are empirical studies from different cultural contexts that also highlight shortcomings in the traditional concepts of theorizing resistance. Davies and Thomas (2005) research into UK public services was inspired by micro-political approaches and made the criticism that resistance is often conceptualized as “actions and behaviours” and it is mostly understood as “reaction to repressive power.” In exploring how individuals refer to management they show different ways in which people transform meanings of management in their sense-making. Anderson has developed a map of subversive workarounds of criticizable systems (Anderson 2008) in the Australian University system. Chiapello has analyzed critique as a discrete resource for changing a reporting system in a French service business (Chiapello and Bourguignon 2005).

A more specific term for “a largely ignored form of resistance” has been suggested by Dey and Teasdale (2015) in their study in English third sector organizations: As “tactical mimicry” they describe a way of ‘acting’ that is more a kind of pretending to act as an entrepreneur to get access to limited resources in new public management. So tactical mimicry or micro-resistance are forms of non-antagonistic protest that “increase space for collective agency” (ibid., 1). Dey and Teasdale consider that although these two concepts are in danger of being influenced by the romanticism of social movements, the most important contribution of these concepts of tactical mimicry and micro-resistance is that “it alludes to the positive liberties of acting as it allows people to practice agency and realize their fundamental purposes” (ibid., 22). It is also to be highlighted here as a kind of interim result; that these concepts imply methodological needs, especially the focus on space and time. Researchers need to be very attentive for “methodological procedures that are able to capture the possibility that compliance in one space might be a precondition for more radical action in another” (ibid., 21). In Peter’s case this would mean to look not only at how he argues (and behaves) within the university but also in other contexts (e.g. as editor for a journal or external expert).

The Australian sociologist Hymes targets studies of resistance as ignoring too much the ‘affective turn’ in sociology. She claims to show the “significance of affect as a lens by which to approach the study of resistance” to broaden resistance “beyond the purview of the two dominant modes of analysis in sociology; namely, the study of macropolitical forms, on the one hand, and the micropolitics of everyday resistance on the other.” In a broadened perspective

an affective approach to resistance would pay attention to those barely perceptible transitions in power and mobilizations of bodily potential that operate below the conscious perceptions and subjective emotions of social actors. These affective transitions constitute a new site at which both power and resistance operate. (Hymes 2013, 559)

So studying identity regulation obviously challenges our concepts of what is grasped as resistance. Before connecting the last approach, we could ask: is the

described phenomenon of critique going underground and power becoming more individualized and/or abstract something constant in modern societies or is it something new? The last step before concluding will show: both.

### 3.3 Sudden Contrasts: Resistance and Collaboration in the Light of Theory of Identity

The described phenomena of de-centered identity (cf. Hall 1994) are not very astonishing from the view of theories of identity. Identity regulation is obtained as ordinary everyday-work of orientation and adjustment to social requirements, that individuals simply are forced to fulfil. In everyday-life the word “identity” often suggests a constant, uniform core, which identity theory denies. In late modernism identities are classified as fragmented and decentered. Identities seem to be constructed of antagonistic discourses and permanently transformed (Hall 1994, 168), so much so that we might ask if the claim to have an identity might be called into question. Instead of identity regulation we could also speak of regulating conflict with (internal and external) identity claims – as the other side of the same coin.

So identities are, as Stuart Hall has pointed out, not nature, but a positioning. These positions are established structurally and through discourse, e.g. through addressing (imputed) mutuality or differences. The diagnosis of decentered identities is not new at all. The theory of the stream of consciousness (James 1890) comes from the age of second industrial revolution: states of consciousness stand in a continuous stream of identifications and experiences of difference. Therefore the individual consists of so many “social selves” as people exist knowing this individual (James 1989, 10). The “total amount” of identity is, according to James, a continuously changing stream of single elements. For almost each specific situation these identity pieces have to be brought into an arrangement that makes sense for the individual as for the group. This theoretical model corresponds a lot with what Sigmund Freud has made famous as model of authorities (*Es, Ich, Über-Ich*). The individual is permanently damned to try to balance a synthesis of all of three. So the formation of identity remains disturbed.

Nevertheless both James as well as Freud assume a unity of the consciousness and of the self, that has to be restored every day and remains coined by more or less hard fractions, transitions, or “sudden contrasts” (Straub 1994, 5), which we could observe on Peter. He had to decide all of a sudden if he takes over the identity ascription (good scientist = long publication list) or if he refuses. Alvesson and Willmott would now ask: how does he regulate his self-perception, so that the indicator ‘publication list’ fits him or so that he will dare to actively and courageously fight against it? Here we can see that in doing both he mixes resistance and collaboration: he absorbs the identity ascription and is questioning it at the same time. He demonstrates a strong demand for



difference from this ascription as well as from other (former) team members. At the moment of his irritation about his own diction (“natural”) he finds himself in a little crisis of identity or of orientation. Experiencing an abrupt demand for difference tags a “sudden contrast” or in the words of Boltanski and Thévenot a “critical moment.”

It is now essential to carefully distinguish whether we want to go on thinking about *personal* identity or *collective* identity. Maybe the picture of a stream of consciousness of personal identity can be transferred to collective identities: ascriptions that are imposed, rejected, or accepted. In the interview we met quite a number of collective identities: e.g. group of professors, group of economists, when I was a young academic, people from the west. These collectives have different ranges of characteristics: from constant and reliable ascriptions to dynamic and fragile ones full of fractions.

Now that we are amply sensitized for the “troubles of successful creation of identity” (Straub 1994, 6), what can we say about traps of recognition? Which new identity ascriptions cannot be accepted by Peter or can only be tolerated by assimilating them? What is it exactly that he does not want to play anymore?

Is it the predictability of the (publication indicator) game that makes it unattractive? Or is it the comparison with others that displeases Peter? He often underlines in the interview that he is only talking about himself. Is it the distinction of his individuality that is going to be violated? On the basis of the interview we cannot find a definitive answer. But we can state that he is distressed by his assimilation of the new formalized social order and therefore he repairs his identity policy a little by dissociating from the ascription (long list = good scientist).

The merging of collaboration with resistance in modern societies is triggered by the permanent protection and reformation of sense-making as a kind of “program” against the “horrible emptiness” that ruptures through the incapability to act. The distress of creating identity can be explained by the protection of this capability to act and – and this was something Peter showed us very clearly – the capability to find the right words. The threat of identity is not being able to say and explain what one thinks is wrong! He does not know if he is more shocked about saying “natural” or not being able to explain this. As harmless as the interview situation is, both shocks are moments of loss of ego. This loss of ego for seconds or “emptiness” can be seen in a way as costs of modernization that have to be cofinanced by the individual. At the same time this identity crisis or loss of ego has an enormous power of creativity for organizations as well as individuals (Straub 1994, 8; see Wagner 2000; Voswinkel 2001, 2011).

Peter is forced by “the system” not only to perform his service but also to agree to the representational act, namely to unite with others he does not even want to play a game with. In part he can tolerate the representation of his performance, but this enforced identification has its limits, can best be seen when

he stops playing. Through his emphasis of not being the author of the rules, he withdraws from the responsibility of an improvement of the game or even to point to its fallibility. The most elegant and reactivating way of dealing with this seems to be staying silent and pretending to be ready to play. Fractions, frictions, and sudden contrasts will only appear in cases of a request to play. At this moment a short time of communicatively protecting self-regard could be expected. This micro-resistant handling of the ascription seems to be quite effective.

Identity theorists agree in postulating “People orient themselves on the basis of their consciousness and emotion of identity.” A

guideline for this orientation in every-day-life as well as its reflection about it is a battle for an *autonomous existence*, so that they are at least able to struggle for self-determination and self-realisation. (Straub 1994, 25)

Can the formalization of performance measurement be seen as a non-stop-attack to identity claims? If so, how could we explain that some team members thoroughly over-identify themselves with performance measurement in putting all their research indicators directly under their website picture, even before their own name?

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#### 4. Residuals of Critique: Reading Conflict as Residual of Emancipation

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To conclude we can summarize that – although identity regulation and micro-resistance might be nothing new – the formalization and publication of individuals’ performance through indicators can reduce individuals’ flexibility to adopt the so called new management social order. In the last step of this article we elaborate on this idea of resistance oscillating between underground and surface.

The case of Peter reflecting on his critical behavior offered a starting point to explore approaches in social sciences that analyze how critique affects individual regulation of conflicts. All approaches discussed here agree in the diagnosis of late modernism, that identities have to be negotiated between different claims. To stay capable of action a flexible handling of identities becomes necessary and fragments of identities are faded in and out. Peter shuttles between the spheres of recognition: membership vs. autonomy, consent of comparability vs. need of distinction, mainstream vs. deviation. Identity (or conflict) regulation has to capture in each situation what would be the cost of leaving the ready-made patterns of recognition. The common diagnosis of the three approaches is that it is the dosing of critique that also sustains the transformation of social order. This also involves for an individual, being able to keep critique safe by putting it into the underground. Processes of defense of

identity and adjustment in different situational needs are obviously well known in scattered theories but could gain a little more attention in research practice.

This does not claim to provide evidence of a new kind of resistance. But combining the approaches has given insights that would not have become apparent through a single concept. They contributed to the challenge of analyzing elusive forms of resistance (against management) in opening up private counter-discourses to a more public sphere: 1. The STS-perspective suggested investigating the balancing of internalization and withdrawal of management standards. 2. CMS showed the way to even take notice of weak and apparently useless forms of resistance as residuals of claims of emancipation. 3. The identity-perspective has finally helped to find the limits of conceptualizing micro-resistance: in demonstrating that what is held to be ‘identity’ is always decentered in modern societies and that regulation takes place on multiple levels all of the time.

Taking all these considerations into account, the specific finding of conceptualizing micro-resistance in (management) research can be stated that it is the formalization of reputational orders that now prevents individuals from compensating this form of control. It is the former, flexible use and permanent realignment that are affected when people’s performance is measured by standards and therefore assertions of identity are partly pushed into the underground.

Finally I would like to highlight some aspects to understand individual criticism (4.1), the organizational use of micro-resistance (4.2) as well as the relevance of micro-resistance for social and management research (4.3).

In facing individual as well as organizational forms of controlling and regulating critique we might start studying how much social change as well as management are reliant on the residuals of critique and how people handle them. Obviously these residuals of critique – mobilized especially in times of change – offer a kind of litmus test for the contemporary hardly visible need for subjectification or even emancipation?

#### 4.1 Individual Strategies for Staying Capable

From the background of the described approaches Peter’s behavior can be qualified as a strategy to maintain being capable of acting under the conditions of this new governance. Individuals both satisfy their needs for (at least mental) autonomy as well as following conditions of organizational membership (like being a professor who is measured against others). So at the same time he collaborates and resists the new system of performance management. That obviously keeps him capable of acting – with the exception of when he once lost control when he could not explain why it felt so natural to use and accept the performance indicators. In regulating himself as a player or game-refuser he can handle different situations with self-respect: Where and when can I position myself as only one member of the whole staff and when do I need to stand

alone as somebody who cannot join the game of the others? When neither collaboration nor resistance is appropriate, a constant position towards “the game” or “the system” would not be bearable: a mandatory commitment to rules or values would not work. Peter’s technique of oppressing his critique but also using it for reflection is a way of handling his conflict with “the system” and is pragmatic in the logic of action.

## 4.2 Organizational Control of Critique

As we have already carved out the possible function of the coexistence of collaboration and critique for the individual, we could pick up the thread of whether this behavior blockades the change for the organization. In looking back over what has been said about “ambiguous situations” (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 374) that produce critique as a source of a “better” order for the future, the described mode of part time rebellion seems to be like a selective paralysis of critique. This is something different to what is usually held as critique or protest in social sciences, neither challenging institutional orders nor producing change. People are not at all content, but also do not actively resist, which could lead to a change of the system. Instead of declaring the end of critique or the end of individual autonomy on the one hand and disqualifying micro-resistance as useless opiate on the other, it might be necessary to refine what is regarded as “conflict” in social research.

It has been shown that conflict and protest are empirical objects that can be observed in their gradual expressions and appearances (i.e. Anderson 2008). The analysis of micro-resistance has demonstrated that the coproduction of individuals is vital to make management work. From the view of organizational use even decaffeinated resistance becomes essential for the organization because it regulates critical behavior. Management needs any kind of active response from individuals to codes of conduct, and even if these codes are held to be not at all convincing they cannot be totally rejected. If we observe the coproducing part of the individuals, even if they temporarily refuse to coproduce, management practices do not look that powerful.

Peter officially sustains the new system of performance management and therefore fosters social change at least for the purpose of management. So he does not block the process of implementing a new performance management system. But he does block critique being a part of optimizing that system as a part of emancipatory change, where critique refers to something not yet existing. It is a common theme in social sciences and humanities that instrumental rationalization is always accompanied by “communicative rationalization” (Habermas 1987; Townley et al. 2003; Miller et al. 2013). We can also realize that the “new spirit of capitalism” (Chiapello and Boltanski 2003) is able to incorporate critique to optimize the system’s efficiency. But the point is that the residuals of critique are mostly ignored in social and management research,

because the light expressions of critique discussed here have not been regarded as notable, neither in management literature nor in organizational research. We need more refined ways of analyzing control and critique to explore the internalization of (self) regulation as well as the need for autonomy made readable in the light expressions of discontent.

### 4.3 Studying Hidden Needs of Autonomy

For the followers of Foucault subtle forms of (self) control are nothing new. But in management research we have not yet sidestepped from romanticized pictures of the resistant subject as well as from the ubiquity of management control. Universities have not turned into profit-centers, at least in our sample. But neither could they continue as they were before, because new conventions of accountability found their ways in – although they remain unaccepted but occasionally tolerated.

It was hardly visible, and therefore difficult to access, how Peter chose from a variety of possible aspects of his “identity work” while making sense of the new social technology of performance management. There is a range of methodological challenges of studying micro-resistance, like observing the different contexts in which people try to adjust and dissociate themselves from representational acts and which parts of identity, taken from other contexts, help to adjust or distance oneself.

The suggestion made here to analyze critique as micro-resistance does not anticipate results of empirical research. This article is concerned with opening up further research for those hardly accessible forms of conflict because this would provide a way into empirically based decoding of the needs for individual autonomy. What can be stated from the dialectic of emancipation and power is that the kind of delicate resistance examined here has been discovered as – although pulverized – premise of institutional change as well as its avoidance.

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