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Review of Engineering Culture - Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation, by G. Kunda

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Publisher's Statement

Original Citation

Meiksins, Peter F. 1992. "Engineering Culture - Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation, by G. Kunda." *American Journal of Sociology* 98(2):413-415.

Repository Citation

Meiksins, Peter F., "Review of Engineering Culture - Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation, by G. Kunda" (1992). *Sociology & Criminology Faculty Publications*. 1.
https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clsoc_crim_facpub/1

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Engineering Culture is a welcome attempt to subject one of the buzz-words of the contemporary business world—"corporate culture"—to empirical scrutiny and analysis. Kunda disagrees with those who see the recent interest in corporate culture as evidence of a sincere desire for democracy and worker participation on the part of management, and portrays it instead as a form of normative control over the emotions, attitudes, and behavior of subordinates. Much of his description of the social dynamics of corporate life will be familiar to readers of *The Organization Man* and *Moral Mazes*. However, Kunda also demystifies recent corporate rhetoric and provides an interesting analysis of the ambiguity of individuals' commitment to the organizations which employ them.

The empirical basis of this analysis is an ethnography of the engineering division of High Technologies Corporation ("Tech"). Kunda describes Tech as a large, international corporation dominated by an engineering perspective; while tensions between engineers and managers may be growing, "the day of the MBA has not yet fully arrived" (p. 28).

Tech's employees describe it as a nonauthoritarian, informal, flexible work environment that rewards individual commitment, initiative, and creativity. However, Kunda sees in this an effort to prescribe a "member role." Tech managers have chosen to limit (though not to eliminate) the use of traditional bureaucratic rules and authority, relying instead on an elaborate and pervasive organizational ideology which emphasizes Tech's people-orientation and its desire to contribute to society. The object is to win commitment, to encourage employees to be "self-starters." Kunda provides a perceptive and subtle, if somewhat repetitious, analysis of the sources of this ideology (which range from top managers to internal experts to ostensibly objective "outside observers").

His discussion of employees' reactions is the most interesting part of the book. "Presentational rituals" (meetings with senior management,

sions contain built-in breaks during which members question the reality of corporate claims; informal interaction and even office decorations are flavored by irony and cynicism about the member role. Since "unqualified role embracement . . . is felt by many to be undignified" (p. 177), members seek to construct an "organizational self" with the ability to balance role embracement and role distancing successfully, the ability to display and maintain an air of ambiguity. Kunda correctly notes that this calls conventional notions about organizational commitment into question; rather than being opposite points on a continuum, attachment and detachment can coexist.

Since employees are aware of the ideological character of corporate culture, why do they embrace the member role at all? At times, Kunda suggests that corporate culture undermines the possibility of authentic experience outside the member role, condemning members to an inherently self-defeating quest for stable meanings in "the race to meet corporate standards of accomplishment" (p. 222). This argument is less than persuasive, however. What keeps them from seeking meaning in the nonmember part of their selves—quitting, detaching from organizational goals, and so forth?

Since Tech's employees do not appear to be doing so, they must be getting something that they really want. This argument is more consistent with what sociologists already know about the socialization and aspirations of managers and engineers. Robert Jackall's *Moral Mazes* emphasizes that managers come to organizations with strong desires for upward mobility. In the context of ambiguous organizations such as Tech, where the route to the top is not clearly spelled out, team playing and organizational loyalty becomes a means of sustaining a successful career. Similarly, many studies have found that engineers often are motivated primarily by a desire to do "cutting edge" technical work. As long as organizations "deliver the technical goods," which Tech clearly does, engineers are willing to accept a variety of organizational constraints. Kunda acknowledges that such trade-offs help to explain Tech employees' embracement of the prescribed member role (pp. 174–77). But he does not focus clearly enough on corporations' ability to satisfy the aspirations that managers and professionals bring to the workplace from outside the corporate culture.

Case studies such as this one inevitably leave unanswered many questions about the engineering of corporate culture. Are organizations that

are struggling financially able to sustain the claims that underpin the member role? When conventional bureaucratic organizations attempt to become flexible organizations such as Tech, do the participatory, quasi-democratic elements involved in this type of management provoke resistance from middle managers concerned to protect a degree of bureaucratic power? Finally, is corporate culture undermined by a stronger sense of managers as "product preventers" in organizations which are not dominated by an engineering perspective? These questions simply indicate that *Engineering Culture* is not the final word on corporate culture. A more comprehensive, synthetic work will have to await further studies to supplement Kunda's insightful book.