

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

FLEXIBILITY AT WORK:
VALUES, PRODUCTIVITY, AND CARE
IN A CONSULTING COMPANY IN BEIRUT

by
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A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
to the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Media Studies
of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences
at the American University of Beirut

Beirut, Lebanon
January 2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deep gratitude goes to my advisor, Dr. Kirsten Scheid, for her relentless support from the moment I envisioned this project until after my thesis defense. The three years where I conducted this project presented me with a plethora of hardships. Nonetheless, Dr. Scheid's empathic mentorship, her thorough and generous feedback, and her stimulating comments helped me write a thesis during a time of collapse and crises while learning greatly and maintaining—what I think are—high scholarly standards.

I am grateful to my committee members, Dr. Elizabeth Saleh and Dr. Sylvain Perdigon for their help in shaping this project, and their insightful questions and comments. I also thank Dr. Livia Wick for her kind encouragement.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my partner Hocine for his unwavering encouragement and intellectual companionship as we embarked on this journey together. This research project is almost as much his as it is mine, for he has enthusiastically discussed and challenged my ideas, repeatedly reviewed my drafts, and lovingly cared for me through it all.

I am also thankful to my family, as their support, patience, and love came in multiple forms. My father, mother, sister, and brother have not only encouraged me as I wrote this thesis, but they have also shaped my curiosity and academic orientation. I appreciate my friends' support and enthusiasm about my project, as our conversations about work have informed my academic interests and influenced my political commitments. I also thank Natalia for helping me juggle my multiple endeavors and for consistently cheering for me.

Each of my interlocutors has taken risks in answering my questions and allowing me as a researcher into an intricately intimate setup. They have nonetheless generously welcomed me as an observer of everyday workplace interactions, thought with me about their experiences, and shared their knowledge, ideas, and feelings. I am grateful to them for trusting me and making this project possible.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Haya Hussein Mortada

for

Master of Arts

Major: Anthropology

Title: Flexibility at Work: Values, Productivity, and Care in a Consulting Company in Beirut

In this thesis, I explore how flexible capitalism manifests itself in the workplace in a consulting company in Lebanon during a time of crises. Having conducted ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with workers, I argue that work becomes a total social fact at Consulting for Development (CD) as it creates and transforms a social configuration including social, affective, ethical, political, and economic dimensions.

I first attend to the ethical dimension of work and show that the organizational culture's value of partnership clashes with the market's set of ethical values. I document the meritocracy that emerges to resolve this tension but then finds itself in conflict with more traditional hierarchies, namely those based on the ownership of the means of production and aristocratic logics. I thus argue that these hierarchies prevented workers from enacting the value of partnership, and countered the flexibility in managing the workplace.

I then turn my attention to the value of work and explore the sense of importance workers ascribed to their work activities. I show that workers at CD valued their work as a means of securing their livelihood and developing their professional skills and networks within a precarious labor market. They also valued work as affective and ethical engagements towards their colleagues, the workplace as a collective, and the world. I argue that the different means of valuing work coincided within the workplace and bolstered the sense of importance that workers ascribed to their work, thus inciting them to overwork.

Finally, I document CD's institutional practices of sociality encouraging workers to bring their hearts to work, by sharing feelings and personal updates, empathizing with others, and offering them support. I show that workers tried to integrate, through these institutionalized socialities, the realm of economic obligations and that of social and moral commitments, which they saw as distinct but interconnected. I argue that the workplace's institutionalized socialities oriented workers towards increased productivity, supported mechanisms for flexible labor distribution, and reproduced power relations within the workplace.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As I worked one afternoon trying to meet an imminent deadline, Rana came into our small shared office, sat on my desk, and started complaining about a colleague scolding her because she had not prepared the material for an upcoming training. She explained to me in detail why she thought she should not have been the one to prepare the material and then expressed her exasperation with her employer and the uselessness of its work. Rana had felt frustrated and disinterested at work for a while. She took on a few work responsibilities and often did not meet her deadlines. Given that she was a good friend, I had repeatedly discussed with her at length her work and personal problems, including her recurring fights with the company's partners, her urge to engage in work that she viewed as meaningful and impactful, and her sad and distracting romantic troubles. Nonetheless, over time, I had realized that while I was overworked and constantly busy, Rana had a significantly lighter workload as she refused to take on more tasks. I also felt annoyed that she often ridiculed my own work's effects on the world while criticizing the company. So after she finished complaining about our colleague scolding her, I expressed my own frustrations, telling her that she often did not deliver her work and that I felt that her cynical attitude and her refusal to take on more work were affecting me negatively. In her anger, Rana replied that she was disappointed in me, as I had become 'part of the establishment.'

Given my friendship with Rana, I suspect that her disappointment stemmed from her knowledge of my political commitments as an anarchist. While she expected me to stand by her in solidarity, as a friend, colleague, and fellow anti-capitalist, I had urged her to work more and contribute to making an economic system none of us believed in. From my perspective, even though I often related to my friend's feelings of alienation and frustration, not only did I materially depend on my salary and consequently my employer's viability, but I also saw her refusal to work as contributing to increasing my own workload because of the company's flexible mode of labor distribution. I thus responded to her refusal to work by inviting her to intensify her own exploitation.

The above vignette exemplifies the complicated positions I often find myself in as an anarchist worker. While I am committed to combating capitalist modes of being and relating because of their exploitative, alienating, and ecologically disastrous effects, my material conditions force me to spend the majority of my waking time reproducing capitalist subjectivities and socialities, often with enthusiasm. Such positions at the intersection of these two commitments have thus informed this research project, as I often asked myself, how am I contributing to reproducing the world as it is, including dominant exploitative and authoritarian relationships? How can I differentiate between mere necessary participation in capitalism and active complicity? How are the ways that I think about myself, my labor, and my relationships conditioned through my active participation in capitalism? What are the possibilities for alternatives emerging out of capitalism, and how can we understand them and hopefully sustain them, while materially depending on participating in capitalism? With these questions in mind, I decided to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in Consulting for Development (CD), where I had been working for two years before choosing the company as my field site. My interest in the company as a field site stemmed from its workers' experiments to bring about an alternative mode of organizing work that relied on trust, collaboration, and personal responsibility. My relative ease of access to the company further motivated me to pursue my research project within CD. Moreover, within this familiar and flexible setting, the potential for questioning capitalism's premises with its active participants seemed possible.

I first came to CD as an intern after I stumbled upon the company by chance. I used to work at the time as a short-term consultant for the World Bank, where because of my contract's terms and the US's immigration regulations I had to spend eight

months employed in Washington D.C. followed by four months of unemployment outside of the US. My intermittent employment situation left me with no work nor income for a third of the year and prevented me from sustaining friendships and social connections as I had to constantly move between countries. During my ‘off period,’ I traveled for a few weeks and then came back to Lebanon where I took photography and calligraphy courses, did some freelance jobs, and hung out with friends after work. Nonetheless, I missed the experience of work and the intimate socialities of spending the majority of my day around the same group of people. A friend who had gone on a date with someone working in the development sector recommended that I intern at the company where he was employed because it sounded cool. Having some time before I flew back to the US, I joined CD as an intern for a month. During that time, I met CD’s partners, employees, and other interns, worked with them on projects I found stimulating, and had lunch with them every day. I appreciated the group of professionals’ commitment towards their work’s social impact. I envied their intimate bonds. I admired their technical skills and their deep knowledge of the field sites they worked in, including villages all over Lebanon and cities around the Arab world.

Going back to the World Bank after my internship accentuated my romanticized view of CD. I compared the heavy bureaucratic working environment where office politics permeated the majority of social interactions to CD’s flexible office dynamics. Instances where some of my World Bank colleagues showed disinterest, and even contempt, towards the target populations for whom we worked not only made it difficult for me to relate to them and develop intimate workplace socialities but, also, reminded me of CD’s workers’ profound ethical commitments. The next year, when I went back to Lebanon for my next ‘off’ period, I passed by the company’s office and asked

partners if the company was hiring. They then called me for a formal interview and offered me a job. Even though the offer promised less than half of my former prestigious position's salary, the loneliness I had felt in DC, the logistical difficulties of living in two different countries, and the appeal of being at CD incited me to join the company as an employee, where I spent around two years before initiating this research project.

A. Overview of Consulting for Development

A group of fourteen professionals founded CD in 2010. Some were former colleagues, others had been involved in the same activist groups, and a few had simply met in a bar. When narrating the history of establishing the company, founders often centered a deadlock for political activists after the 2008 elections as a key motivator to start the consulting company. For instance, Edmond, a founder, recounted that after realizing his activism and civil society work had little impact to affect change, he decided to establish CD to influence policies and policy-makers. Mariana, another founder, who had always wanted to improve existing systems for better access to justice and more equality in Lebanon, joined in founding the company when she met a group of people with similar social and political goals. Consequently, the founders who came from various educational and social backgrounds shared a political commitment to enhancing secular participatory governance in the Middle East, and an aspiration to achieve this vision through working in the sectors of public policy and public management. Founders thus viewed the company as part of their efforts to reform the public sector, in a way that complemented their activist engagements. In order to make clear their political and social commitments, and convey the importance of their ethical

engagements, founders defined the company as a ‘mission-driven consulting firm, and a social business.’ This definition entailed that a set of ethical values played a key role in managerial decisions regarding the company’s operations and internal processes.¹ I further develop in the first chapter of this thesis the implications of these social commitments.

The founders adopted a partnership model for their company where each of the fourteen founders owned a varying number of shares. Upon founding CD, only one partner worked full-time while others maintained their jobs and worked on certain tasks based on the company’s needs. Over time, the company’s consulting projects increased in number, and more partners joined CD as full-time workers. Others remained in the company as shareholders, and only sporadically engaged in work assignments based on their availabilities and the company’s needs. After three years of operations, the company recruited its first employee, with the mutual understanding that a new recruit would become a partner within three years of joining so that the company maintains a partnership-based model where workers co-owned the company and shared the responsibility for managing and operating it, as well as the risks and financial benefits of owning CD. Additionally, CD hosted unpaid interns who worked at the company for short periods of time. During my fieldwork, the ‘interns’ were also called ‘learning consultants’ to highlight the educational aspect of their experience at the company.²

¹ Workers at CD did not use the term ‘management’ to describe any of their systems. When I used the word ‘management’ in describing the company’s working systems to a new employee, Edmond intervened and explained that we did not just do management, as our approach of ‘managing’ engaged the soul. Workers thus used instead the word ‘catalyst’ to refer to a person leading a team on a certain project, and the word ‘enabler’ to refer to a worker involved in managing the company. I nonetheless use the etic term ‘management’ and ‘managers’ to refer to the activities of governing the company for ease of conveying meaning.

² I use in this thesis the category of ‘workers’ to refer to full-time partners, employees, and interns, as those belonging to these categories were the ones who spent the majority of their working time contributing their labor to CD. I choose to use the category of workers instead of the emic classification

By the time I started conducting fieldwork in July 2019, CD had around ten part-time partners, eight full-time partners, seven employees,³ and five interns. Part-time partners had limited involvement in the company's day-to-day operations. Those who got involved at all mostly attended retreats, contributed sporadically to consulting projects, and participated in partners-only bi-annual discussions about the company's financials. Full-time partners included founding partners—who had contributed to founding the company and worked there for most of their time since CD's establishment—and partners who had bought shares after having spent three years or more as employees. Full-time partners occupied simultaneously two positions within the relationship of employment. Partners had company shares making them owners of the means of production. They also sold their labor in exchange for wages, meaning that they were workers at the company, exploited by their own capital. The employee category, to which I belong, grew over time and reached ten employees by the time I ended my fieldwork in October 2020, and sixteen employees currently, in January 2022. Finally, three to five interns worked at the company at any given point in time. An intern stayed at the company typically between one and six months, and some were eventually hired as employees. Except for a few foreign interns, the majority of CD's workers during my fieldwork were Lebanese and middle-class. Most studied in the country's private universities and many hailed from diasporic or business-owning families. Age was the most salient differentiator between those belonging to the different categories, as partners tended to be in their mid-thirties to mid-forties,

of 'team members.' given that the latter is used inconsistently within CD, as it is sometimes used to include interns, and at other times only refers to waged full-time workers.

³ Workers at CD rarely referred to 'employees' or those earning a fixed salary as a separate category of workers. Nonetheless, the categories of 'partners' and 'interns' were well-defined and frequently used within the company.

employees in their mid-twenties to early thirties, and interns were mostly fresh graduates or university students. My key interlocutors in this thesis had the following positions at the company during my fieldwork:

- Alaa, partner
- Ali, employee
- Alicia, employee
- Edmond, partner
- Eliane, partner
- Dina, employee
- Jenny, partner
- Leila, employee
- Mariana, partner
- Maya, employee
- Mazen, employee
- Sohaib, partner
- Yumna, employee

Moving beyond the company's workers, CD's managerial systems adhered to a model for organizing the workplace where flexibility defined the organizational structure, social relations, and work contracts. For instance, employment contracts did not set specific work positions, job responsibilities, and working hours. Labor distribution systems encouraged workers to constantly take on different responsibilities based on arising needs. The model also replaced rigid and standardized lines of authority with individual responsibility, as workers were trusted to make decisions that would not prioritize their personal interests over those of their colleagues and/or the

company. Scaling out, CD's model followed a trend in business management encouraging malleable alternatives to job specialization, departmentalization, control through chains of command, and hierarchical structures (Linstead et al. 2004). This model coincides with a global economy rewarding flexible organizations that can react and adapt to change (Martin, 2015). While CD's managerial systems and practices frequently changed, a commitment to flexibility remained constant throughout workers' attempts to imagine ways of working together. This commitment suggests the reification of flexibility as a trait that defined CD's 'personality.'

During the time I conducted my fieldwork, between July 2019 and October 2020, the company's flexible managerial systems and practices underwent high pressure during a time of intense crises. My fieldwork thus coincidentally provided a laboratory for examining the company's flexibility under intense pressure. Indeed, a period of persistent uncertainty, financial hardships, security concerns, and a heavy sense of despair constitutes my ethnographic fieldwork's background. A lot happened during my sixteen months of intermittent fieldwork. In the Fall of 2019, my colleagues and I participated in the nationwide uprising. During the first few weeks, we stopped going to the office and working altogether as we met in protests and exclusively discussed blocked roads, political organizing, and news from protest sites on our WhatsApp groups. After this brief interruption, we went back to work. We nonetheless adopted new routines as frequent roadblocks and strikes entailed that many of us worked from home and went sporadically to the office. Soon after, as banks withheld workers' savings and CD's financial reserves, we experienced an intense period of uncertainty as we worried about the company's and our own financial future. With the intensification of security risks and the collapse of the country's infrastructure, we discussed options

for relocating outside of Lebanon, and eventually, a few colleagues moved to Turkey during the period where I conducted my fieldwork. Moreover, the spread of the coronavirus completely changed the workplace's dynamics, as we shifted to an online work modality in February 2020. Finally, the Beirut explosion of August 2020 also disrupted workplace practices, as we took time off to protest, volunteer to help those affected, and grieve. The grim tone of my ethnographic vignettes thus reflects the overall depressing mood at the time.

B. Fieldwork Methods

In this thesis, I attempt to provide, based on the fieldwork I undertook intermittently for a sixteen-month period at CD, a meticulous ethnography of my interlocutors' work experiences at the company. I thus document workers' interpretations of the company's flexible mode of management, their own working activities, and workplace socialities. During my fieldwork, I was an employee, a friend, a researcher, and a committed activist with an agenda of advocating for workers' rights. In managing these various commitments, I constantly shifted between taking for granted the company's systems to operate as a worker, and questioning the familiar categories from an outsider's perspective. I also intimately related to my interlocutors' struggles as I often shared them.

My fieldwork primarily consisted of participant observation of group meetings and team retreats, some of which I conducted in person, others over online calls after the spread of the coronavirus. I specifically took fieldnotes during three retreats, two of which were in person, in July 2019 and December 2019, and one online in July 2020. Following Karen Ho's (2009) example of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in her

own workplace, I also intermittently kept a journal of my time at CD during parts of my fieldwork and I used some of this data as ethnographic material. Moreover, I conducted ten interviews with my colleagues, five partners, and five employees. When selecting interviewees, I diversified the sample based on how long workers had been at the company, their role at CD, and their general attitude towards the workplace. I also made sure to interview colleagues who expressed enthusiasm about participating in the project and avoided asking colleagues who were visibly busy during that period. Even though I had planned to conduct interviews with interns, my part-time status at the company during the majority of my fieldwork and the work-from-home modality prevented me from building rapport with any of the interns who joined the company during that time. I nonetheless talked informally to some as part of the research project to ask them about instances that were of interest to me. Finally, I draw in my analysis on written material from the company's website, retreats' PowerPoint presentations, and documentation of managerial systems.

While my initial fieldwork design included a spatial mapping of the office and ethnographic observations of everyday workplace interactions, the move to a work-from-home modality after the virus spread in February 2020 thwarted my plans. Moreover, I had intended to document the workplace over time and capture choices that occurred over the company's life to inform its work systems. When I started documenting the evolution of CD's system for planning and distributing labor, I realized that the scope of such a project was massive. Given the flexibility in CD's managerial model, frequent changes permeated all aspects of the organization, including its workers, systems, working practices, and dynamics. Tracing the company's history not only required considerable effort but exceeded my capacity to make up for the lack

of documentation of the relevant data. Collecting such data would have required multiple extensive interviews with workers who had contributed to designing, developing, and implementing workplace systems. Therefore, I present in this thesis a synchronic snapshot of CD, knowing that the company I document no longer exists. Workplace dynamics have considerably changed, the workforce has grown significantly in size, and many managerial functions have been increasingly formalized. New workers joined, some left, working systems have been adapted or slid into oblivion.

Given the entanglements of my various roles within the company, including professional, academic, and activist ones, I had to develop unique ethical strategies. When I chose to do fieldwork at CD, I pitched the idea to one of the partners who expressed her enthusiasm and ran it by others. After those latter also expressed interest in the project, I conducted an initial session for all workers at which I presented a short version of my research proposal and anonymously collected workers' questions and concerns. I then read the concerns out loud during the session and tailored, in consultation with the group, my approach to addressing those, based on the proposal I had prepared and my colleagues' suggestions. A key emerging concern related to confidentiality and potentially damaging the company's image which I mitigated by referring to the company and its workers using pseudonyms and having my colleagues review the thesis before submitting it to the library. To respond to a second concern about potential conflicts arising between workers after reading each other's perspectives, I tried to conceal, in sensitive cases, workers' identities by changing recognizable features including pseudonyms and genders, and obfuscating details about particular incidents. I also intend to seek workers' approval before sharing ethnographic data about them with the rest of the group.

My colleagues and I worried that my presence as a researcher would invade the workplace's privacy. The ambiguity of my position at CD as both a worker and an ethnographer meant that I had to clearly delineate my presence as each. I thus wore a badge saying 'anthropologist' to indicate to my colleagues that I was observing interactions and dynamics at a certain point in time. When workplace interactions moved online, I asked at the beginning of a group meeting if anyone minded the anthropologist's presence in the meeting. Additionally, my colleagues suggested in a team meeting that 'the anthropologist' needed a pseudonym like everyone else. This is how Alia, my alter ego, came to be. My pseudonym helped my colleagues summon my presence as a researcher when they thought that a particular statement or incident was relevant for my thesis. Most importantly they also used it to indicate when Haya the colleague or friend was welcome as a witness and participant, but Alia the anthropologist was not. Statements such as 'tell this to Alia,' 'I miss Alia,' 'I feel that Alia is judging me.' or 'are you here as Alia?' helped my colleagues delineate my field site, prevent it from invading their workplace's intimacy, and express their feelings towards my presence as an anthropologist by distancing the colleague from the researcher. My pseudonym thus eased my ethical and social concerns of intruding on my colleagues' workplace.

My colleagues brought up a final concern in the initial session about my 'objectivity' when studying a place to which I am intimately connected. I thus consistently reflected throughout this project on my positionality within the company and vis-à-vis my colleagues. As this introduction's opening vignette shows, my commitments as a worker within CD are multiple and sometimes contradictory. I am dedicated to my employer's profitability, given my financial dependence on the

company, which was compounded by the country's economic collapse. I have also developed friendship bonds with many of my colleagues, and I am attached to CD as a project I have spent a large portion of my productive and creative energies on for the past five years. My sense of belonging to CD was also bolstered by the fact that I have witnessed the organization survive crises, and change significantly over the years. Given the company's flexible managerial systems, I have also played a significant role in shaping it to reach its current state. To use my employer's terms, 'I feel ownership over CD.' Moreover, I am not only the longest-standing employee at the company but also a potential material co-owner of CD as I might buy shares and become a partner in the coming few months. I thus feared that some of my interlocutors might see 'the establishment' in me the way Rana did, but then realized that most of them felt comfortable criticizing many of the company's aspects during interviews.

I recognized that partners' awareness of my commitment to the company's profitability played a key role in them trusting me as a researcher within it. I thus felt responsible towards my colleagues, particularly partners, in portraying CD in a written thesis to be shared within the workplace and outside of it. Feeling entrusted with insights, including intimate and often sensitive information, and being offered help and field site access left me feeling indebted towards my colleagues and my employer. I tried to use my fieldwork data to improve managerial systems and workplace dynamics, as I describe later in this section. Nonetheless, I still felt the obligation to reciprocate the generous gift my employer had offered me, especially during the period where I conducted fieldwork. Engaging critically, in writing, with my colleagues' cherished workplace systems and practices compounded the anxiety stemming from my feeling of indebtedness towards them. Consequently, I felt the obligation to demonstrate my

commitment towards the company by working more and controlling my impulse to harshly criticize and protest practices and decisions that I did not agree with, in group conversations within the workplace. I realized, with time, that I reciprocated more productivity and complacency as a worker in return for access to the workplace as a fieldworker.

In addition to my commitment to CD's profitability and sustainability, I experienced, as a worker, my labor being exploited, and I felt alienated from its products. This position entailed that I easily empathized with workers' frustrations and struggles and that I extended my solidarity towards colleagues in an implicit labor struggle where our interests lay in opposition to that of our employer. I nonetheless often feared writing my political views over their experiences of the workplace. Thinking of my colleagues as one of the audiences I am addressing in this thesis, I was adamant about them recognizing their own workplace experiences and dynamics in my written material. My employee status also influenced at times my analyses of workplace dynamics particularly when I felt overworked and angry at my employer. In those instances, I found it difficult to empathize with partners as employers and take their experiences seriously. I soon realized that both my inability to respond to the power differential and my above-described feeling of indebtedness left me with no other outlet to express my frustration beyond writing the thesis. I also often felt annoyed when some of my interlocutors dismissed workplace systems that I had spent a lot of time developing, disseminating, and enforcing. In such instances, I felt that my colleagues undermined my efforts and my workplace agenda. Maintaining my critical distance as an anthropologist thus required the conscious and strenuous effort of analyzing these various emotional entanglements and sometimes using tensions arising out of my

positionality as ethnographic data. I also managed my diverse commitments as a worker and anthropologist by taking seriously the complex ways in which workers experienced and interpreted working systems and practices, and analyzing those while maintaining a critical approach towards my workplace.

My colleagues had various expectations from this research project. My cultural expertise as an anthropologist and my interest in examining the workplace's culture, a source of pride to its workers, encouraged them to support my project. Moreover, the research process was not completely foreign to my colleagues, as the company offered 'organizational development' as a service to its clients. For instance, consultants often designed and implemented a tailored research process, including interviews and workshops, within institutions and recommended accordingly a set of changes to achieve managerial objectives. While the similarity in research methods and to a certain extent, object of study, between my research project and the company's organizational development consulting projects made the process seem familiar to my colleagues, it introduced some difficulties in aligning expectations concerning the research's outputs. For instance, I clarified that my research was not only oriented towards recommending areas of improvement but also theorizing workplace socialities and dynamics. Even though these two objectives are not necessarily contradictory and mutually exclusive, they entailed different temporalities and modes of engagement with the data. For instance, the scholarly approach to investigating work required a long process of writing-up fieldnotes, transcribing interviews, and coding data, while the fast pace of change within CD could not wait for recommendations arising out of such a long process. The incongruent temporalities did not however prevent me from using some findings in trying to refine workplace processes and systems. I thus found myself in a

situation similar to that of Kimberly Chong (2018) during her fieldwork in a management consulting corporation in China, where she contributed to assessing and managing the company's culture and processes.

While I did not refuse the collaborative engagement that my colleagues at CD expected of me, I made sure that my interventions helped the company's management while also accounting for diverse workers' perspectives, concerns, and resistances to the status quo. For instance, I was asked, since I had interviewed ten workers, to help prepare a session to manage the company's culture. I used some of my anonymized findings to contribute to designing the session in a way that would bring up key issues within the company. Moreover, I intensified my engagement in designing systems for the company, including a tool for professional development. I also intend to share this thesis and present my findings to my colleagues, while orienting those towards concrete actions in the near future. I nonetheless could not always partake in all engagements my colleagues asked of me. For instance, Edmond asked me a few times to facilitate team retreat sessions on culture, but I did not end up doing that given that the objectives for the sessions—such as making sure workers felt connected to the collective during lockdown—had little overlap with my data and research process. I also sensed that the short time allocated to the session and the narrow preset objectives would not allow me to question some of the assumptions underlying the exercise.

I failed in fulfilling some of my colleagues' requests even when I tried to do so. For instance, Mariana asked when I started doing fieldwork for my research process to be informative for all workers. She suggested that I share on a periodic basis, throughout my fieldwork, short anthropology papers on similar research. However, when I tried to fulfill this request, I found trouble identifying short and easy reads that

exemplified the critical and collaborative approach that I tried to adopt in my research. I was also concerned that the staunch anti-capitalist tone of many anthropological works I considered for this form of engagement would worry partners who had granted me access to their company as a field site. Moreover, the tumultuous times where I conducted my fieldwork, and the consistent interruptions that I experienced—during the 2019 uprising, the coronavirus spread, and the Beirut explosion—eroded any sense of continuity to my research process. These distractions did not only prevent me from committing to periodic engagements, but also made me feel that sending scholarly work to my colleagues as readings was untimely. Finally, some colleagues had suggested when I initially presented my proposed research project that I document the company’s model of operations. I have not, so far, done that, given the models’ fast pace of change during the last two years, and the distance between this request and my research objectives. I nonetheless intend to offer my help in developing this documentation by building on some of my fieldwork, in the near future.

C. Theoretical Framework

The ethnographic data grounding this thesis consists of my colleagues’ interpretations of their workplace practices, experiences, and systems. I also engage with theoretical analyses inspired by anthropological literature. Crucial to this thesis is the theoretical orientation outlined in the ‘Gens Feminist Manifesto for the Study of Capitalism’, namely the necessity to challenge the ‘economic’ domain’s boundedness (Bear et al. 2015). I thus build on a body of anthropological literature contesting models in which ‘non-capitalist’ institutions, such as the household or kinship, feature radically different socialities from those within the market, and show the social, affective, and

ethical commitments workers developed within their workplace. Moreover, I respond to the Manifesto's call to provincialize a view of capitalism as a coherent, totalizing, and inevitable structure, logic, and trajectory, and rather understand it as a set of diverse, unstable, and contingent networks of human and non-human relations emerging out of heterogeneous pursuits of modes of being, becoming, and relating (Bear et al. 2015). Consequently, I avoid the 'capitalocentrist' impulse of essentializing capitalism and looking for an imagined impersonal economic logic driving workplace dynamics and systems (Gibson-Graham, 1996). I rather trace down workers' diverse ethical commitments, socialities, subjectivities, and means of valuing workplace interactions and experiences. While I do not deny the structural power of capital, I move my analysis beyond identifying its reach and impact to, also, investigate how it is made, reinforced, and challenged in everyday practice. Doing so reveals its constructedness. This theoretical approach generates a hopeful critique of capitalism and lays the groundwork for thinking an otherwise, and eventually answering some of the questions I ask in response to my opening vignette about alternatives emerging out of capitalism (Miyazaki, 2006).

Scholarly accounts of work have also directed my thinking. A mainstream narrative about contemporary work traces a major historical shift from the hegemony of Fordist modes of work under industrial production to that of precarious employment concentrated in the service industry in 'new,' 'late,' or 'flexible' capitalism (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Harvey, 1992; Ferguson and Li, 2018; Kjaerulff, 2015; Horgan, 2021). While anthropological literature has often challenged and complicated this narrative, accounts of contemporary work still imply a significant transition, by highlighting trends of work becoming increasingly pointless, precarious, immaterial, and

inaccessible (Ferguson and Li, 2018; Kjaerulff, 2015; Graeber, 2019; Horgan, 2021). Although these trends have asked valuable questions about work, they nonetheless cannot encompass the reality at work which tends towards radical global heterogeneity (Munck, 2013). Ethnographic accounts of work thus have the potential to document the complexities arising out of work, elucidate differences, and situate global trends within local contexts to avoid flattening the diversity of work experiences and over-asserting these trends' implications. Ethnographies and anthropological analyses focusing on organizational culture and the related ethical dimensions of work informed my attention to my interlocutors' commitment to the value of partnership in organizing production and workplace relationships (Ho, 2009; Chong, 2018; Krause-Jensen, 2010; Wright, 1994). Accounts highlighting the meaning of work, or its lack thereof, directed my research towards examining the ways in which workers valued their work while highlighting economic, social, ethical, and affective dimensions (Graeber, 2019; Bear, 2014). Finally, anthropologists' attention to socialities within the market, specifically in the context of increasing flexibilization of employment relationships informed my focus on long-term relationships emerging between workers (Elyachar, 2010; Narotkzy, 2015; Kjaerulff, 2015; Martin, 2015).

Having explored the various meanings that CD's workers ascribed to their work, I deduce that work at CD is not merely an exchange relationship of labor for wages, but rather a 'total social fact'—as defined in Marcel Mauss' essay *The Gift* (2002)—as it created, reasserted, and transformed a whole social configuration including affective, ethical, political, and economic dimensions. Work is social and affective, as it fosters long-term socialities of care, contributes to building a sense of belonging to a community, and even nurtures workers' feelings of self-satisfaction. Its ethical character

allows workers to enact their commitment to bringing about a better society, and to practice their moral values in everyday interactions. Work at CD is also political in that it engenders power relations and inspires means of resisting them. Finally, from an economic point of view, work is central to the relationship of employment, and also allows workers to develop their professional networks and future credentials. Work at CD thus permeated many aspects of workers' social life, often constituting its focus. One of my colleagues, Leila, feared the pervasive aspect of work at CD, as she told me in the interview I conducted with her that she did not want her work at the company to become her whole life. She thought that workers often developed 'unhealthy' forms of attachment with the workplace, and then suggested that individuals rotate between various institutions and roles to form new connections and 'move out of their bubble.'

While Leila's depiction of work as a total social fact presents it as an individual choice and problem, scholarly accounts of work show that this phenomenon can be generalized beyond CD and the individual workers in it. In her book *Lost in Work*, Amelia Horgan traces another trend when she argues that contemporary work 'is creeping' over more of human life. As people spend the majority of their time and efforts at work, the possibility of them finding other sources of recognition, sociality, enjoyment, learning, production, and self-expression—that emerge out of friendships, hobbies, and social engagements—dwindles. She adds that contemporary work often becomes a defining mode of workers' life as it makes of leisure and sociality a new set of work demands, with workers expected to enjoy themselves and be social in the workplace. Work thus does not only capture a significant portion of workers' time and efforts, but also subsumes their desire to form caring bonds, belong to a group, have positive effects on the world, and have fun. The trend Horgan (2021) traces and its

localized form that I document at CD are connected to productivity standards, human resource management practices, and flexibilization of labor relations and managerial systems. I trace in the following chapters some of these connections to relate work as a total social fact at CD to a broader global context.

D. Stakes

I wrote this thesis with three audiences in mind: workers at CD, leftist activists, and anthropologists. I also wrote to myself as a member of each of these three audiences. I thus attempted to strike a delicate balance between adopting the critical approach that is necessary to produce rigorous anthropological work, a collaborative approach that is oriented towards improving the workplace for all of its workers, and an engaged approach that attempts to bring about different and better modes of relating to the self, work, and others. I will detail in this final section my commitments towards these three audiences and some key conclusions that I hope to convey to them with this thesis.

I first address my colleagues to open up conversations or contribute to ongoing ones concerning our modes of organizing work and relating to each other in the workplace. My colleagues wanted different things from my thesis, including venting, seeing themselves represented in a written work, and documenting the workplace's mechanisms and systems. I also hope that the more theoretical aspects that I pursue here help us clarify and refine together the institutional mechanisms and interpersonal practices through which we enact our organizational culture, value our work, and relate to each other. Moreover, I aspire to think together the space that we allow for ourselves to experience leisure, socialities, and means of expressing ourselves outside of the

workplace. Throughout the time where I conducted the research project, my colleagues often anticipated the findings and expressed enthusiasm for the process and the final outcome. Indeed, when introducing me to the company's clients and business partners, some colleagues often boasted that I was also an anthropologist conducting ethnographic research at CD. With this level of anticipation for my thesis in mind, I hope that the final outcome does not disappoint, and that it generates productive conversations within my workplace.

I also address in this thesis leftist activists and particularly labor organizers. I hope that my analysis of the localized form of capitalism and labor relations at CD informs thinking around alternative modes of organizing. While calls to unionize or adopt everyday forms of resistance, such as foot-dragging are necessary,⁴ work as a total social fact requires different approaches to resisting its encroachment on workers' lives. Even thinking about Marxist staples like raising class consciousness becomes more complex when accounting for individuals who simultaneously own the means of production and perpetuate intense modes of self-exploitation. I thus aspire to contribute to a hopeful critique of capitalism and open up questions about means of organizing that account for the changes in the operation of power within capitalist workplaces.

Finally, my last and main audience is anthropologists, as I hope to advance through this thesis scholarly knowledge on a local form of flexible capitalism at work during a time of crises. In the first chapter, I examine CD's organizational culture while particularly attending to the value of partnership. I argue that workers' ethical commitment to this value required them to perform a constant work of mediating

⁴ I am using here foot-dragging as described in James Scott's (1985) ethnography 'Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance.' Calls to intentionally slow down production have nonetheless entered mainstream leftist organizing without always having the explicit reference to Scott's work.

between ideals they aspired to achieve and the reality of everyday practices, norms, and systems. Translating the ideal into working systems for a company operating within the capitalist market mandated that workers operate at the intersection of incompatible value realms, those of partnership and participation and the market's values of profitability and efficiency. I show that workers introduced a meritocracy in an attempt to mediate between the incompatible moral orders. A traditional hierarchy based on the ownership of the means of production coexisted with the meritocracy and introduced ambiguities for workers operating at the intersection of these two hierarchies. Finally, I argue that founding partners deployed aristocratic logics to restrict sharing their power within the workplace. They thus undermined the enactment of the value of partnership, and the company's flexible mode of management.

In the second chapter, I attend to the ways in which workers valued work, by ascribing meaning to their own work activities and making that meaning visible and desirable to others. I explore the following question, 'Why do workers overwork even when the experience puts them through physical and emotional hardships?' I show that workers at CD worked to earn wages, and to comply with their workplace's time discipline and task discipline. They also valued work as a means of accumulating experience and connections in a precarious labor market. Additionally, I show that workers also ascribed non-economic value to their work, as their ethical and affective commitments towards their colleagues, their employer, and society also encouraged them to intensify their own exploitation, and overwork.

In the third chapter, I document workplace socialities and highlight institutionalized workplace practices inciting workers to share their feelings and personal updates, empathize with others, and offer them support. I show that workers

tried to integrate, through these institutionalized socialities, the realms of economic obligations and that of social and moral commitments, which they saw as distinct but interconnected. I also document the various ways in which these socialities sustained the commoditization of labor; they oriented workers towards increased productivity, generated affective resonances supporting managerial decisions, supported mechanisms for flexible labor distribution, and reproduced workplace hierarchies. Additionally, I document a different origin of long-term bonds within flexible capitalism, as I show that a particular school of management incited workers at CD to develop institutionalized practices that deliberately produced, managed, and enclosed socialities, exchanges, and emotional expressions for the purpose of capitalist accumulation.

CHAPTER II

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE PARTNERSHIP AT WORK

The last day of CD's mid-year retreat of 2019 started with an exercise where Sohaib, who was facilitating the session, split the attending team members into three groups, and asked each to list the shared values making up the company's culture. My group of six met at a small table by the hotel's pool and started discussing and noting down values. Every time a person suggested a value, they explained its importance and relevance to their work at CD. For instance, Jenny started by highlighting how participation in decision-making helped her learn from colleagues as she listened to others debating potential courses of action. Leila added diversity as a value, and specified that the company was a safe space where everyone could be who they really were. Mazen agreed saying that we accepted difference, to which Paul replied that we built on differences. My group discussed the importance of these values for some time, until Sohaib called all groups back into the main room and had a representative from each team present their values, such as 'innovation, integrity, partnership, participation, and learning.' Sohaib highlighted the similarities between teams' contributions and added that these values made him feel connected to a community. He then mentioned how the company's culture should guide our thinking as we planned during the rest of the day how to achieve CD's strategic objectives, namely expanding to new countries, reaching out to new partners, and strengthening institutional systems.

Workers at CD discussed organizational culture on a regular basis. In company retreats, weekly team meetings, while developing new workplace systems, and in special meetings dedicated to dealing with issues related to the culture. In these discussions, workers related a set of shared workplace values to their everyday work. Sometimes they perceived that workplace interactions drifted away from the set of values to which they aspired to adhere. Other times, they used these values to justify decisions about hiring, establishing business partnerships, and applying to new projects. In interviews I conducted with my colleagues, many hailed our employer's culture as a

unique asset differentiating CD from other organizations, such as their previous employers, other consulting companies, clients, and government institutions. Some workers argued that they would stay at CD even if offered a higher paying job elsewhere because of the company's culture and its positive effects on their wellbeing at work. Still, the project of negotiating a workplace culture must be viewed dynamically. There is no firm, abiding agreement on what this culture contains or implies. Workers often eagerly tried to demonstrate contradictions between the company's values and workplace incidents and practices. Some even questioned the shared set values as they desired to change the culture and create a different kind of workplace.

Organizational studies and management literature define a company's organizational culture as the shared set of ethical values and practices binding the workforce together (Ho, 2009; Wright, 1994). They often highlight the importance of sharing moral commitments within the workplace in orchestrating organizational members' actions towards a common purpose through providing employees with a sense of common direction, aligning individuals' search for meaning with the employer's objectives, and offering guidelines for workplace behaviors (Chong, 2018, Krause-Jensen, 2010, Linstead et al, 2009). Additionally, management scholars and practitioners often argue that creating a 'strong organizational culture'—one that is shared among all workers—shapes a harmonious, committed, and highly-motivated workforce, thus precluding the need for supervision and control over working systems (Krause-Jensen, 2010, Chong, 2018). Given the perceived benefits of organizational culture, businesses invest in developing and disseminating an organizational culture through trainings, corporate rituals, incentivizing behaviors, language, and information and communications technology systems (Chong, 2018).

While the concept of organizational culture is relatively new, having been coined by management consultants in the 1980s, the argument that certain values and cultural preconditions lead to economic prosperity can be traced down to Weber's influential essay on the role of the ascetic Protestant ethic in shaping modern capitalism (Blim, 2012; McKenna, 2006). Nonetheless, anthropologists often had little interest in the concept, especially that organizational studies defined it using anthropological categories in unfamiliar, and often disconcerting, ways (Wright, 2014). Anthropological accounts of organizational culture have mostly adopted a Marxist approach reducing it to a means of consolidating the exploitation of labor, or a Foucauldian approach depicting it as a process of neoliberal subjectification (Narotzky, 1997; Chong, 2018). While these trends present cogent and convincing arguments, both miss the ethical dimension of organizational culture, and thus center its economic value at the expense of its moral ones. I thus seek to complement these current anthropological analyses, as I explore the ethical dimension of culture.

To attend to CD's organizational culture does not deny the economic implications of adopting and disseminating a set of ethical values within CD. My interlocutors often highlighted how the company's organizational culture bolstered their sense of belonging to the workplace, facilitated the company's geographical expansion to new countries, improved decision-making processes, and distributed responsibilities to advance organizational efficiency. Importantly, while I distinguish between the ethical and economic dimensions of organizational culture as analytical categories, I do not assume that the two dimensions are separate and independent from one another. Rather, I choose to examine organizational culture through a morality lens to

complicate views of ‘the economy’ as a singular bounded logic and demonstrate the intertwining of ethical considerations with work practices (Bear et al, 2015).

I examine, in the following, the ethical dimensions of organizational culture at two different registers. The first relates to the fixed set of reified values and essential meanings describing the organizational culture as a list of moral commitments to be shared by the workforce. For instance, exercises such as the one I recount in the opening vignette urged workers to align themselves with a set of ethical commitments constituting the company’s culture. Such exercises extracted those commitments from particular people and made them into a ‘personality’ of the company’s operations and self-narration on its website and in official communications. Workers often presented those values as guiding the company’s work and internal systems. They also listed them in the project proposals and methodologies they developed showing that CD’s ethical commitments extended beyond organizing the company to shaping the work its workers delivered. The second register relates to the contested and dynamic everyday practices, norms, and templates for action that characterized workers’ lived experience of their workplace, and their concrete practices of managing and being managed. Susan Wright (1994) defines organizational culture in this sense as the continuous process of organizing and negotiating order at work, including the concrete ways in which workers set, interpret, and contest workplace systems, practices, and norms. This action-oriented definition of culture grounds it in a context that exceeds the workplace. It also shows the meaning-making process of organizing workplace relationships as negotiated and dynamic, rather than imposed by management.

In examining culture at these two registers, I attend to workers’ labor of mediating between the set of fixed essential meanings they aspire to achieve within

their workplace, and the everyday practices and norms of organizing work. This labor requires translating abstract moral values into working systems and practices and vice versa. Investigating the work of mediating between these two registers foregrounds workers' power struggles as they set, contest, and transform the workplace's managerial practices and systems. This approach allows me to attend to workers as subjects and explore the ways in which they shaped normative workplace practices, rather than reducing them to mere engineered products of culture, or a form of capital—human capital—that is managed through culture. In examining the work of translation between the two registers, I analyze instances where workers discussed the company's values, such as in the opening vignette, and my interlocutors' assessments of workplace systems as enactments of the organizational culture's values: the doing that brings the company's personality to life.

In this chapter, I focus particularly on the value of 'partnership' as a means of distributing power within CD, as my interlocutors often discussed this ethical aspect of organizational culture in interviews and group sessions. Indeed, my colleagues often argued that their commitment to an ethos of partnership within the workplace countered the emergence of hierarchies and enabled a participatory mode of decision-making. Additionally, when I presented my research proposal to my colleagues, many expected me to investigate and demonstrate whether or not managerial systems were participatory and non-hierarchical. Interviewees responding to my questions presented evidence to show how practices deviated from the normative ideals, or highlighted the 'genuine' aspects of their attempts to bring into being a workplace committed to the ethical value of partnerships. While I try to address some of these concerns in this

chapter, my main purpose is not to investigate the truth value of those claims but rather explore how workers related to the company's ethical value of partnership.

In the following sections, I first examine how CD's workers translated the value of partnership into working systems and show how the resulting systems clashed with the capitalist market's moral values. I then examine the hierarchies that emerged out of workers' attempts at mediating between the often incompatible requirements of the partnership value and the capitalist market's values. I argue that workers developed a meritocratic hierarchy conferring power to workers based on their work responsibilities. Nonetheless, traditional hierarchies related to owning capital coexisted with, and often superseded, the meritocracy. Finally, I build on Bourdieu's description of tensions between democratic and aristocratic logics to show the limits of enacting a value of partnership at CD. I conclude that the organizational culture introduced double binds within the workplace that helped maintain workers' ethical commitments to incompatible value realms.

A. Enacting the Value of Partnership

At the beginning of 2020, during the early stages of the financial crisis in Lebanon, Edmond called for a meeting including CD's employees and partners. He explained that the bank withheld the company's financial reserves, and that we needed to decide how to manage CD's resulting financial precarity. He explained that he had considered three options. The first one was to buy property with the financial reserves, which would take the money out of the bank but deplete the company's liquidity and threaten its ability to pay its operating costs in the short term, including rent and salaries. The second option was to transfer the coming months of workers' salaries in advance, and the third one was to do nothing and hope for the best. The meeting's attendees debated the options, some volunteered to research the financial implications of each of them, and those interested met the next day to choose the future course of action.

Maya reminded me, in her interview, of the instance I describe in the above vignette to show that CD's decision-making practices were participatory. As an employee at the company, she had access to information about CD's finances and contributed to making a key decision on how to deal with the financial crisis. Similarly, Edmond, a partner, highlighted in his interview with me the uniqueness of CD's operational model' in comparison to a partner organization. He emphasized the importance of workers' 'unparalleled' access to information about the company's finances, clients, projects, and workplace relationships. He added that sharing this knowledge about all organizational issues with workers felt like a 'luxury', as he could, in a time of crises, trust any of CD's workers to set up an office for the company abroad, reproduce the same kind of relationships with a new team and new clients, and perpetuate the company's values in new working systems. By qualifying them as a 'luxury,' Edmond considered valuable the workplace practices giving workers access to information about the company and engaging them in decision-making, thus translating the value of partnership into concrete working mechanisms.

Maya and Edmond's depiction of CD as a flat organization adopting a partnership-based management model and a participatory approach to decision-making mirrors the official description of CD. I deduced that description by examining how workers narrated the company in their official communications, whether on the website, or to clients, partner organizations, and new recruits. Nonetheless, workers often questioned and contested this view. Conversations about participation and exclusion from decision-making frequently arose in group discussions and one-on-one conversations, showing CD's workers' varying views about the translation of the

partnership value within the company. Thus, the official depiction of non-hierarchy and participation within the workplace was not shared among all workers.

During an online session that Eliane had organized to address problems in the culture, discussions arose between workers about the various issues they faced at CD. A few employees brought up concerns about participation in decision-making. Yumna argued that company-wide consensus-based decision-making processes opened up conversations without leading to conclusive outcomes. She added that, eventually, after the participatory approach failed, decisions were made in a vague, inconsistent manner. In some instances, the majority set the course of action, while in others, one person who did not agree with the outcome of a vote could overturn the decision. To avoid having to deal with the resulting lengthy and ambiguous process, Yumna took decisions related to her unit either by herself, or by looking around the room, imagining who would create problems if unhappy with the outcome, and then consulting with them. Yumna's description of the struggles she faced when making decisions shows the practical limitations of adopting a non-hierarchical model in which every worker contributes to making decisions related to the collective. The temporal rhythm of consensus-based processes did not match the pace at which decisions needed to be made within a market-based collective. For instance, the payment schedule for a contracted company developing CD's website, or the deadline to submit a bid for a new project imposed on workers time limits for making decisions that did not allow for lengthy and inclusive discussions leading to consensus. The ideal of a non-hierarchical structure thus clashed with the market's temporal rhythm, and led to workers adopting non-participatory shortcuts to reach fast decisions.

CD's operation as a company within a capitalist market mandated a profitable mode of management whereby individual workers met certain productivity standards. A non-hierarchical managerial system with no lines of authority and no supervisory mechanism still required a process of managing workers' output levels to guarantee profits for the company. In order to comply with the profitability market requirement, CD's workers devised a self-accountability management system where every worker held the responsibility for monitoring their own productivity. If self-accountability failed and a worker did not uphold their commitments towards the collective, other colleagues were expected to give that worker feedback, thus creating a mechanism of social accountability. Adopting a workplace management system that relied on individuals self-managing and mutually managing each other diffused the managerial task of regulating workers' behavior to fall in line with company objectives. While the self- and social-accountability system was designed to avoid the emergence of hierarchies and the concentration of power, Mariana argued in the interview I conducted with her that that system did not always successfully regulate workers' productivity. She added,

'Not everyone is capable of operating within this culture of feedback and self-accountability. We have had those challenges at multiple instances during the organization's life, and this has taught us that people are different. Just because Haya is responsible, it does not mean that the next person is going to be the same.'

Other workers often shared Mariana's view that the company's structure failed at securing accountability. For instance, many repeatedly proposed during conversations about the company's culture to introduce different accountability mechanisms, such as warnings or salary cuts. These suggestions however were never adopted as some workers argued that such practices would clash with the organizational culture and its

value of partnership. Mariana said in the same interview that every time the group discussed accountability, some workers pushed back on establishing criteria and mechanisms to hold individuals accountable as they argued that these would contradict the company's culture. She concluded that this was one of the reasons CD did not have any formal mechanisms to deal with underperforming workers. Nonetheless, when workers perceived that the company's value of partnership clashed with the market's profitability requirement, they reconsidered the company's managerial system to introduce mechanisms of accountability, as I will show in the next chapter.

The above-described instances show the difficulties that workers encountered in mediating between the values of the capitalist market the company operated in—namely promptness, efficiency, and profitability—and the values of partnership, which entailed a non-hierarchical company structure and universal access to decision-making. As workers negotiated the antagonistic and coexisting moral frameworks, they realized that operating as a company imposed structural barriers limiting their ability to bring into being a hierarchy-free workplace. My colleagues thus thought of a flat organization with universal access to information and participation in decision-making as a set of ideal values guiding the collective, rather than a possible reality for CD. For instance, Yumna told me in her interview that a key struggle at the company emerged from the tension between workers desiring to live up to their ethical values and the need for them to operate in the world as it was.

Nonetheless, even when workers acknowledged the structural barriers and resulting practical difficulties to achieving partnership, non-hierarchy, and universal access to decision-making, many still thought that these moral values informed workplace practices and norms. Indeed, workers often praised the participatory aspects

of CD's decision-making mechanisms, as they compared it to practices in other companies. For instance, Sohaib described the way all workers discussed and decided together how CD would deal with the economic crisis as unique. He argued that most other companies did not account for workers' views when mitigating risks and handling the consequences of an emergency situation. To say it differently, when a worker declared 'CD is a non-hierarchical workplace' they often meant 'we are not there yet, but unlike other employers, we aspire towards a workplace adhering to a set of ideals including the participation of workers in key decisions, and minimal organizational hierarchies.' In the following sections, I attend to the ways workers dealt with the incompatibility between the ethical values of partnership and non-hierarchy, and capitalist market values of efficiency and profitability.

B. Claiming Space within a Meritocracy

In an attempt to mediate between the market-based entity's structural need for fast decision-making and accountability and workers' drive to design a managerial system adhering to their moral value of limiting power imbalances within the workplace, workers introduced a meritocratic hierarchy by creating the categories of enablers and catalysts. The enablers category consisted of individuals whose responsibilities included managing the company's units and making sure that company systems—such as those related to accounting, workers' satisfaction, communications, securing new contracts, and quality control—operated smoothly. This category excluded individuals who only worked on client-mandated projects, and those who ran the company's operations but did not participate in managing them. Catalysts, on the other hand, held the responsibility of managing client-mandated projects. Sohaib argued

that the company's managerial system did not confer power to individuals, as the power resided within the task at hand. In principle, any worker could gain the power to influence colleagues depending on their work responsibilities. An enabler thus had the power to influence other workers when dealing with matters related to the unit they managed, and a catalyst had power over others within their project's scope. Those in charge of managerial responsibilities could hold others accountable and follow up with them by asking questions such as 'Where are you at?' or, 'How did you spend your time?' Introducing the categories of enablers and catalysts thus conferred to individuals the ability to influence others when they handled managerial responsibilities corresponding to their technical expertise.

Given that the scope of enablers' responsibilities included managing the company's units, this category of workers gained some level of influence over the collective as a whole. For instance, with the introduction of the meritocratic system, enablers started holding weekly meetings right before the team meetings, that included all workers, to discuss certain issues and make decisions related to managing the company. Workers' opinions about enablers' responsibilities and the scope of their decision-making capacity varied greatly, even among enablers themselves. For instance, Edmond, an enabler, argued that all team members contributed to decisions at the levels of projects they worked on, and strategic decisions concerning the company, as those were discussed in team meetings and retreats. He limited the scope of enablers' decision-making to routine company operations. Sohaib, also an enabler, argued in a group conversation that the only issues discussed in enablers' meetings without consulting with other team members concerned company financials. He thus maintained that enablers' scope of decision-making was narrow. Finally, Alaa, a third enabler, said

in a group discussion that introducing the enablers' meeting had moved decision-making conversations from the weekly team meeting to the enablers' meeting. This statement suggests that the meritocratic hierarchy had limited the scope of the 'partnership' value from the whole group to only enablers.

Regardless of the enablers' scope of decision-making—and thus the scope of decision-making exclusion—partners justified creating this category by citing the structural barriers to a non-hierarchical workplace. For instance, Eliane, an enabler and partner, rationalized the need for a meritocracy when she stated, in a group conversation, that while she could probably only see a meter ahead, a more senior person could envision things at a kilometer's distance. Ali, an employee, also expressed not needing to get involved in all decisions as he trusted the competence of those making high-level decisions affecting the company. Other workers maintained that they did not need to participate in making every decision if those with decision-making power had the necessary skills. Additionally, Edmond argued that the market could not wait for company-wide consensus, so a smaller group having the relevant technical competencies needed to hold the responsibility for fast decision-making. Thus, workers often perceived the new managerial class within the company as both competent and needed for effective operations within the market.

In justifying the merit-based hierarchy, some workers argued that enablers' limited scope of decision-making minimized the group's impact on relationships within the company, while others excused the meritocracy's exclusionary nature by maintaining that its democratic aspect did not completely clash with their values of participation and transparency. For instance, any worker who wished to participate in managing the company or a project could in theory expand their expertise, learn the

relevant technical competencies, and assume managerial responsibilities to become an enabler or a catalyst. Workers I interviewed called the process of taking on bigger responsibilities ‘claiming one’s space within the organization.’ For instance, Jenny told me that partners consistently encouraged her to claim a space for herself within CD, to become responsible for the company, and worry about it. In principle, a worker’s access to decision-making, and their ability to ascend within the meritocracy thus depended on them taking the initiative of adopting an entrepreneurial attitude, where they embodied the company’s owners, shared their responsibilities, and treated their concerns as their own. Additionally, a worker’s ability to claim their space also depended on their technical competencies. Sohaib gave me the example of a worker who came to him after becoming a partner, seeking advice on how to learn to manage the company, as she desired more decision-making leverage within the organization. Sohaib encouraged her to ‘learn by doing,’ the way he did. He argued that engaging in decision-making conversations would help her accumulate the needed experience to expand her influence on managerial decisions. The company’s meritocracy thus encouraged a particular kind of worker subjectivity, that of a self-willed worker taking personal initiatives to assume managerial responsibilities and perpetually develop their skills. Workers valued having managerial responsibilities—as opposed to only working on consulting projects and routine operational tasks—first because it gave them more leverage over decisions within CD, and second because the associated increase in their scope of responsibilities demonstrated professional growth in a labor market valuing constant career progression.

Jenny described to me, in the interview I conducted with her, the difficulties she faced when trying to forge a managerial role for herself within the company. She had spent years as an employee at CD, worrying about the company and seeking to be

engaged at various levels. She later bought shares, became a partner, and aspired to play a role in managing the company. She however could not find a space for herself to claim. She tried to negotiate for the space she desired, only to realize that '[other partners] had something else in mind, and that was it.' When claiming her space, Jenny realized that she had little say in forging the path she liked within the organization. Her experience shows that the mechanism of claiming space allowed for more workers to participate in a limited set of managerial functions. For a new worker to claim a space as an enabler, and handle a responsibility related to managing the company, another one had to let go of that responsibility. Despite a collective commitment to flexibility, then, Jenny encountered a scarcity of managerial roles and realized that the space for *her* professional development was limited within CD's extant framework.

Sohaib wondered, in his interview, about the practical limits of the meritocratic managerial system as he listed cases that limited workers' ability to gain the managerial power of following up when in charge of certain responsibilities. He first observed that individual workers' characters, the ways in which they expressed their authority, and their level of comfort with assuming control all affected their effectiveness in influencing others. For instance, some workers just ordered him to follow instructions, while others guilted him into complying as he worried that they might get sad or angry if he did not fulfill their requests. Additionally, Sohaib specified that the person enforcing the task needed to be highly regarded within the group for others to accept their authority, adding,

'If someone does not fill the tools,⁵ or does not respect time, or people think that they don't work, and they try to enforce any task, even if it is

⁵ Sohaib referred here to a set of tools that workers used to manage the company. These included tools aiming at distributing labor, tracking applications to new projects, and sharing data about ongoing projects with each other. For the tools to be effective, individual workers needed to input their data—or 'fill the tools'—using the relevant technological platforms. My colleagues thus often argued that when a

their responsibility to do so, no one would take them seriously because they would think, at some subconscious level, go do your work before telling me what to do.’

Sohaib thus thought that a worker’s ability to claim their space within the company and assume a managerial role depended on colleagues’ perception of this worker’s position within the company, and their related willingness to accept the worker’s authority.

Yumna, an employee, gave me an example illustrating the influence of those at the receiving end of meritocratic authority in legitimizing that authority. When she first joined CD to manage the company’s communications, she needed CD’s workers to develop texts about their technical work for her to use on the company’s website, newsletter, and other official communications. She distributed responsibilities to workers and set deadlines for them to respond to her writing prompts. However, they consistently missed her deadlines, and only delivered the texts months later. Yumna noted that progress only happened on the task when one of the partners said, ‘*Khalas*, this week we get it done.’ The authority here emanated neither from the task, nor from the expertise of the person in charge, but rather from the position of the partner requesting that others comply with the request of Yumna, the expert in communications. Yumna repeatedly expressed her anger and frustration about the process throughout the months of waiting for the texts to be delivered. In one of the company retreats, she asked workers if they wanted to work in a place where things only got done after a partner ordered them. Her experience with the texts suggests that her appeal to affective means for influencing colleagues and motivating them into action, through expressing

worker did not fill a tool, they undermined both its effectiveness in helping manage the company and others’ work of inputting their own data, as it made that work useless.

frustration and anger, did not just stem from her character, as Sohaib seemed to imply. Had others accepted her authority, she would not have felt the anger and frustration that she later used to influence colleagues. Yumna's experience suggests that when workers were confronted with her authority, they responded to her positionality within the relationship of employment rather than to her merit and work responsibilities, as defined by her job title and related position within the meritocracy.

Maya, an employee, also narrated to me her own example of not being able to claim her space and assert her authority when managing her project. As she prepared for a consultative workshop for a hundred attendees, she developed a plan to manage the large operation, including six consultants facilitating the sessions and six note-takers. She developed a facilitators' guide for the entire day detailing what should happen every ten minutes. On the day of the workshop, she realized that one partner who she had assigned as a facilitator had not read her guide, and another one suggested introducing changes to her workshop design. She concluded that designing a structure, such as her workshop guide, was meaningless if others were not on board with it. When I asked Maya how she reacted to colleagues not complying to her requests, she responded that she adapted accordingly. She replaced the facilitator who had not read the guide with another one, changed the workshop's design based on comments, and quickly briefed the whole team to change the plan. Even though the meritocratic management system put Maya in a position of authority within the project, she did not hold any of her colleagues accountable but rather flexibly accommodated when they did not comply with her requests. In this case, Maya deployed flexible strategies to counter the rigidity in the company's structure—where power was concentrated at the level of

partners rather than being flexibly assigned to individual workers depending on their roles.

Other employees also expressed difficulties in holding partners accountable: Mazen argued that it was a difficult thing to do, and Ali did not feel that he was in a position to do so. Leila also argued that those who were more senior had more leniency in missing deadlines. As employees narrated instances where they tried to claim space only to have their authority undermined, or reported feeling inadequate and intimidated to hold partners accountable, I can safely assume that workplace interactions contradicted Sohaib's depiction of the meritocracy as assigning authority to the person through their task. When Sohaib explained that colleagues' perceptions of a worker influenced the likelihood of them accepting that worker's authority, he only linked that perception to a worker's competence and workplace performance, thus reasserting the meritocracy. Employees however more often linked that perception to a worker's position within the relationship of employment.

Max Weber's types of legitimate authority can help analyze the limits of CD's meritocracy. Weber (1978) defines authority as the chance of one's commands being obeyed by a certain group of people. He identifies three types of authority: legal-rational authority which depends on formal rules, traditional authority that derives from customs and social structures, and charismatic authority that relies on the individual's appeal. While the principles of CD's meritocracy established a legal-rational authority, where a worker's work responsibilities conveyed authority to them, employees' accounts of this authority's limits show that it was often meaningless, as it did not incite partners to obey them. Thus, another form of authority related to the structural relationship between partners and employees undermined the legal-rational authority. I

will show in the next section, how traditional forms of authority related to workers owning the company superseded the meritocracy's legal-rational authority.

However, before exploring traditional forms of authority, I will investigate workers' resistance to CD's meritocratic hierarchy. While the hierarchy allowed in principle for democratic access to decision-making and professional growth, workers did not always desire to claim their space and adopt an entrepreneurial attitude towards the workplace. For instance, during a conversation about CD's culture, a few workers thought that decision-making processes were too participatory and that the culture encouraged over-sharing. Some preferred limiting their contribution to decisions on projects they worked on, without having to 'hurt their heads' dealing with strategic decisions concerning the company. Workers justified this preference by stating that when participating in making a decision, they shared some of the responsibility regarding the final outcome, even though strategic decisions often exceeded the scope of their role within the organization and their technical expertise. Partners confirmed the value of workers' participation in making key decisions as many argued in the interviews I conducted with them that shared decision-making released them from the anxiety associated with the decisions taken, as it distributed the responsibility for making them.

Workers advocating for a scope of work excluding managerial responsibilities desired a different subjectivity than the one mandated by the meritocratic managerial system. Instead of adopting an entrepreneurial ethos and taking on the employer's concerns, these workers preferred a more rigid definition of work as an exchange of a pre-defined set of duties for corresponding wages. During a session where employees expressed their preference for narrowing their scope of work to avoid contributing to

decisions affecting the company, a partner responded that such a preference coincided neither with CD's value of partnership nor with its mode of management that relied on workers' participation in decision-making. He added that if workers preferred to have one person be responsible for the collective and take decisions on everyone's behalf, all workers would have to abide by these decisions without objections. This response suggests that workers' flexibility in adopting various responsibilities at work, including managerial ones, was a requirement for the company's flexible decision-making mechanisms, whereby all workers could, in principle, influence decisions. Another partner intervened in the same session to argue that participatory decision-making had been adopted as a means of decentralizing power, making workers feel more accountable and responsible towards the space, and helping control individual impulses of changing the culture. In this case, even though some workers contested the participatory model, elements related to the organizational culture and its associated set of moral values were presented as non-negotiable and exceeding the scope of participation. Nonetheless, Sohaib highlighted in his interview the importance of allowing workers to change both working systems and the organizational culture. He considered limiting the possibility of contesting the company's ethical values as a threat to those values. Thus, although Sohaib, a partner, rejected fixing the organizational culture's values as constants that are independent of workplace dynamics, still my ethnographic data shows that the organizational culture prevented workers from participating in making the workplace non-participatory.

C. Owning the Means of Production

As evidenced by employees' accounts of workplace dynamics, a hierarchy that depended on workers' position within the relationship of employment coexisted with, and sometimes superseded, the workplace's meritocracy. In his interview, Sohaib noticed a flaw in the meritocracy as an enactment of the partnership value. He noted that partners were consistently the ones who exercised managerial power. He added,

'We genuinely put the data in front of everyone, and create a platform where we think together, but in some instances, you feel that a smaller group takes more initiatives, or does more discussions. I'm not saying this to mean that others are to blame, but some people assign to themselves more responsibility. Practically, I deal with any situation with the logic that I have more responsibility than others, so I think it's still there even though there are genuine attempts to make sure that everyone is involved, that there's partnership and ownership.'

Sohaib thus wondered whether an unsaid barrier prevented non-partners from gaining influence within the company. Employees I interviewed gave examples highlighting this barrier, as they described decision-making processes excluding non-partners. Ali told me about an instance where he felt excluded from participating in making a decision related to a project he managed. After a colleague working on Ali's project quit, he realized that his team was understaffed and mentioned the issue in a team meeting. One partner asked him on the side about the project's requirements, and went back to make a decision about how to resolve the issue with other partners. The options were either to hire a new worker and thus deplete the project's budget, or assign other currently employed workers to the project on a part-time basis. Ali told me,

'I know it's not my place to be in every conversation related to my project, but I feel... actually, yes, it is my place [...] I want to have an input because I am the one talking to the client and beneficiaries. [Partners] have given me the freedom to talk and act, so they need to keep me in the loop [...] I worked on everything related to this project,

down to the smallest detail, and they come in the end and tell me this is a conversation we have among ourselves and then we tell you!’

Ali had claimed his space as a catalyst by following up on all details and maintaining external relationships. However, his exclusion from decision-making thwarted his efforts to adopt an entrepreneurial ethos, as this exclusion reminded him of his position as an employee. In expressing his frustration during the interview, he told me that he realized the project was not ‘his father’s,’ so when a partner came to consult with him again concerning the same issue, he told her he preferred if partners sorted the issue out amongst themselves as he no longer desired to get involved in making that decision. Nonetheless, he then felt that he could still help, so he went back and offered the partners his support, saying ‘they should stress with me and let me stress with them. I am more than what they expect.’ During the interview I conducted with him, Ali oscillated between accepting that he was ‘just an employee’ with a limited scope of work, and wanting to feel responsible for everything related to his project. Claiming space for Ali did not only mean taking the initiative of assuming bigger responsibilities and acquiring the technical skills to do so, but also contesting his own exclusion by adopting the entrepreneurial attitude mandated by the company’s flexible structure despite feeling that his sense of ownership over his project was undermined.

Even when partners did not exclude employees from participating in making decisions, the latter sometimes self-selected out of decision-making because they took for granted the traditional authority of owners of the means of production over workers. For instance, Maya told me in the interview I conducted with her that even though she disagreed with the decision of moving the company to Georgia to escape the difficulties

of operating from Lebanon, she did not feel that she could, as an employee, contest decisions on matters that ‘make or break the company.’ She added

‘I’m an employee, whether they empower me or not, I know my limitations. I don’t find myself in a position where I can argue until I become a partner [...] it’s just realism, it’s nice of them to ask for my opinion, but I’m still an employee at the end of the day [...] I know that at some level, they have plans in their heads, so who am I to question them?’

Even though partners consulted with her and other employees, and asked them for their opinions, Maya thought that they were the ones who should ‘realistically’ make the important decisions, as they had higher stakes in the company and they would therefore reap the financial consequences of significant decisions. Maya did not believe in the non-hierarchical—and even the meritocratic—workplace, and her disbelief reproduced a traditional hierarchy based on owning the means of production. Additionally, her statement suggests that she considered partners’ ‘empowerment’ of employees to be the key mechanism by which the latter could gain influence within CD. According to this perspective, partners’ position as owners of the company conveyed them power that they could then choose to imbue employees and interns with. Maya thus took for granted partners’ traditional authority and refused to imagine the possibility of a workplace based on a value of partnership that extended to employees, thus reproducing the traditional authority.

Maya also argued that workers’ presence in a consultative meeting did not necessarily warrant their participation in openly expressing their views. For instance, when Edmond asked for workers’ opinions about withholding a percentage of everyone’s wages for the company to maintain its financial wellbeing during the economic crisis, Maya thought that these financial precautions were unnecessary but

decided not to express her concerns. Still, she thought that the decision had already been made, and that none of the employees, including herself, felt comfortable questioning it. The above instances suggest that workers sometimes refrained from contributing to decisions because they doubted that their opinions would be accounted for.

Even though partners consulted with employees in team meetings and retreats, Maya argued that some decisions allowed for integrating workers' opinions while others did not, as her above statements suggest that she suspected partners to sometimes have preset plans 'at some level.' Maya's argument confirms Ali's experience, as he felt uncertain about which decisions would account for his input. In making her point, she compared the above-described process of making a decision about the company's financial reserves to the decision related to withholding salaries. While she felt totally engaged in making the first decision, she did not think that there was a space for her to influence the latter. Employees thus had an incomplete agency; they could express their opinions and affect decisions only to the extent that these opinions did not clash with partners' 'preset plans.' Leila, also an employee, articulated this perspective when she argued in a group discussion that the company's participatory processes often encouraged workers to express what they thought, without necessarily engaging them in making decisions. Similarly, Ali told me in his interview that enablers discussed and resolved in their weekly meetings the company's issues, and then presented their decisions in the team meeting including all workers to see others' reactions. While he thought that non-enablers had some space to give feedback during team meetings, he was not sure about the extent to which that feedback affected the final decision.

Workers' incomplete agency suggests that none of the coexisting workplace hierarchies—the meritocracy and the partners-employees hierarchy—configured all workplace interactions and decision-making processes. Workers tactically appealed to various hierarchies to demand their inclusion in making decisions and justify others' exclusion. For instance, partners highlighted the importance of the hierarchy based on owning the means of production to justify excluding employees from partners-only discussions about the company's financials. Conversely, Ali appealed to his position as a catalyst within the meritocracy to demand being involved in making decisions concerning his project. He nonetheless only claimed his space—and thus asserted his meritocratic authority—partially as he still contended that he had a limited scope of work as an employee to avoid feeling diminished when encountering partners' 'preset plans.' Ali's oscillation between accepting his position as an employee with limited authority and claiming a bigger space for himself stemmed from the ambiguity of operating at the intersection of overlapping hierarchies, and his uncertainty about whether or not he was entitled to participate in making the decision. Indeed, the scope of a decision, its context, workers' interpersonal relationships, and their expertise affected the configuration of the workplace's overlapping hierarchies and workers' ability to appeal to them.

The broader social context within which the company operated further restricted workers' abilities to imagine and bring into being a non-hierarchical, partnership-based workplace. For instance, Ali told me in the interview I conducted with him about an instance where he asked partners to send a critical email to a client because he thought that the recipient would prefer to have the important conversations with partners rather than 'just an employee.' He argued that a non-hierarchical structure sounded lovely in

theory, but CD did not exist in a void. It needed to resemble traditional hierarchical companies for it to be understood by market actors including clients and partner organizations, and thus grow. He added, ‘we need to step out of the bubble we’re living in, benchmark ourselves against other companies, and say this is the chairman who does this, and these are the board members, and this is everyone’s role.’ Ali reified the models that he thought prevailed within the market the company operated in, as he considered that counterparts would only trust an organization they could understand, one where every person had a title and a role within a clear structure. He also, significantly, doubted the potential of CD’s model having an impact beyond the company’s walls.

Similarly, Maya, an employee, recounted to me an instance where she felt the pressure to comply with traditional hierarchical orderings. She was leading a project that Edmond, a partner, worked on as well. During a meeting with a minister, the latter constantly addressed Edmond, given that he perceived him as the one in charge. Nonetheless, Edmond tried to undermine this perspective as he invited Maya to lead the meeting. Later when the minister wanted to have an email sent, he turned to Maya, the young-looking woman in the room, and dictated the content. Edmond then volunteered to send the email himself and typed it on his phone. Maya commented, ‘This sent the message that I am not the assistant on the project, I am leading the project, and a 45-year-old man can send emails the same way, I, a 25-year-old-woman can.’ Unlike Ali who wanted CD to conform with dominant models, Edmond often argued that consultants influenced clients and beneficiaries when they enacted the company’s value of partnership. He thus tried to challenge external expectations of a hierarchical distribution of roles based on age, gender, and position within the employment

relationship. Nonetheless, instances where workers interacted with clients and beneficiaries reminded them of the common order of things and required them to exercise a conscious effort to maintain the possibility of an unorthodox order.

The above ethnographic vignettes and my interlocutors' perceptions as expressed in interviews show that workers' position within the relationship of employment affected their ability to influence decision-making. Even when employees adopted an entrepreneurial ethos, they still felt like 'just employees' at the end of the day. Meanwhile, partners who would be most affected materially by decisions, also felt that they had a bigger say in making decisions. A policy giving workers access to shares after having spent three years as employees allowed the latter to become partners and undermine barriers stemming from the structural power imbalance inherent within the employment relationship. The policy encouraged workers to adopt the entrepreneurial ethos and claim their space within CD; it changed their material conditions and made them actual owners of the company. Indeed, three workers had bought shares and transitioned from employees to partners. Nonetheless, Alaa argued that the *founding* partners—a group of partners who had founded the company and contributed to its management since its inception—had more leverage than other partners in decision-making. On the other hand, Sohaib complicated the idea that ownership of the means of production determined alone the level of influence individuals had on decision-making. He argued that individual workers' labor contribution and their involvement in the company's everyday operations also affected their leverage in decision-making. He illustrated his point by giving the example of employees without shares in the company having more impactful contributions to decision-making than part-time partners who owned large amounts of shares in the company but did not work there. Thus, other

elements exceeding workers' position within the employment relationship affected their level of influence on company decisions. I will explore in the next section how interpersonal relationships and workers' history within the company affected workers' access to decision-making.

D. Building Relationships of Trust

Ali told me, in the interview I conducted with him, that whenever he faced any issues in the workplace, he sought advice from Mazen who had been at the company for five years, rather than his coach—a person assigned to help him manage such issues—because the latter had recently joined the company.⁶ While he thought that his coach was technically competent to give him advice, Ali argued that someone who was 'rusty' would have mastered the company's 'ins and outs,' and would know exactly who to talk to and how to go about solving the problem. By 'rusty', Ali meant someone who had weathered many experiences. Ali thus thought that the interpersonal relationships that workers developed after spending time at the company conferred to them greater influence within the workplace. Edmond further confirmed in his interview the importance of seniority within the company to a worker's access to decision-making. He thought that workers' level of trust in a new colleague—which was acquired through accumulating positive interpersonal and professional experiences with them over time—determined how soon they gave them access to sensitive information and included them in making important decisions.

⁶ Every worker was assigned a coach, thus creating coach-coachee bonds between colleagues. Workers often described their coaching relationships as sites to plan their professional development, manage workplace relationships and conflicts, and address personal problems and struggles. Workers often perceived coaches to be more senior than their coachees, either by age, expertise, or position within the relationship of employment, with the exception of the most senior partners who had to be assigned less senior coaches.

Sohaib explained to me in the interview I conducted with him how a worker's sense of ownership and their ability to take on bigger responsibilities within the company depended on their history and relationships within the workplace. He argued that after spending time at the company, workers gained more leverage over decision-making, as they felt more comfortable in the space and accumulated experience. The partnership policy—giving employees access to shares within three years of joining the company—recognized the importance of, and structurally rewarded accumulated time and experience in developing a worker's sense of ownership. He nonetheless added that becoming a partner did not determine alone workers' influence within CD.

‘The founding partners are living the crises together. We founded the company together, we surmounted problems, we fought, we built things, and like in any relationship, a bond happens between individuals. It's true that as time passes Haya is spending more time at the company, she's been here for five years, but during those five years, the group of people who started together have increased their shared experiences. It's not that we stopped building more trust in each other, and new people came in and spent some time, and it all became equal. During the time Haya spent with us, we [the founding partners] have built more experiences together, and improved the company together. I think it's more related to group dynamics than it being policy.’

The above statement shows that Sohaib did not consider spending a set amount of time at the company, acquiring the needed skills, claiming space, and buying shares warranted access to managerial level decision-making. While Sohaib and Ali both individualized workers' access to influence—presenting it as interpersonal relationships and group dynamics—Sohaib's statement suggests a more structural element related to accumulating common experiences with the founding partners is what conferred power to workers. These common experiences could only be accumulated by working together, surmounting problems, and fighting.

However, Sohaib did not see the required level of accumulated trust to attain partnership as absolute—accumulated for example after having spent three years at the company—but rather as relative to the level of trust between founding partners. The trust requirement of matching the connection between founding partners thus introduced an impossibility for non-founding partners who wished to feel included at the highest level of decision-making within the company. Bourdieu’s description of the tension between a democratic and an aristocratic logic in a field, as described by Ghassan Hage, illustrates this impossibility for CD’s workers. Hage (2012) argues that those holding a dominant capital in a field want others to desire their capital and thus adopt a democratic discourse. They imply that capital is available for anyone desiring to access it, and that accumulating it would confer recognition and power. If nonetheless, a group takes the democratic logic seriously, those holding dominant capital fear losing their dominance, and adopt aristocratic logics instead. Such logics devalue actively accumulated capital in relation to innately possessed and non-accumulated capital, thus thwarting others’ efforts of gaining power within the field, cementing the existing order, and naturalizing their hold on power. While Hage uses the above description to explain white nationalism,⁷ Jenny’s expression of frustration about her inability to influence decision-making at CD, despite her consistent efforts, shows that similar dynamics prevailed in relation to accessing managerial power within CD. She said in her interview,

‘The messaging is ‘you are part of this space,’ and ‘you own this space.’ This is the discourse. At the same time, I feel a contradiction. If we really own the space, we need to be engaged in worrying about it, but

⁷ Hage (2012, p.63) argues that similar dynamics characterize the way in which those holding ‘national capital’ in Australia related to newly arrived immigrants. On the one hand, they encouraged them to assimilate and presented national culture as both desirable and ‘up for grabs.’ On the other, if immigrants acquired this national culture and transformed it, those in a dominant position deployed the aristocratic discourse whereby only those born into a certain national culture can really have it.

[founding partners] often worry and take decisions without us. I remember at some point, the company went through a big struggle, and it almost dissolved. We felt the energy, but we didn't even know about it. It felt like they did not take us seriously [...] I tried to worry about the company for years, I wanted to be engaged all of this time, and when I reached here and became a partner, I was already too drained and demotivated to carry the company's burden.'

After working at CD for five years, and buying shares to become a partner, Jenny still felt that she had limited leverage over decision-making within the company. Sohaib's above statement suggests that her exclusion stemmed from her inability to build interpersonal relationships with founding partners due to her absence during the company's early years. Given that the new criterion for access to decision-making excluded non-founders, it perpetuated an aristocratic logic. Jenny who had taken the democratic logic seriously only to be excluded by the aristocratic one thus felt frustrated and angry. During a team discussion, she expressed feeling that some decision-making processes were exclusive, to which Mariana responded that one of the reasons why she might have that feeling was that some decisions were taken informally, due to the absence of set mechanisms for decision-making. She gave the example of making decisions related to choosing projects the company applied to, saying that she talked to Rania, another founding partner, over the phone once per day to talk about things that did not necessarily relate to work. During those conversations, they sometimes discussed together potential projects and decided on future courses of action. Thus, the relationships of friendship between founding partners—that were developed through sharing particular struggles and were thus unavailable for non-founding-partners' accumulation—introduced exclusive decision-making circles exceeding the two

workplace hierarchies, and perpetuated power imbalances based on aristocratic logics.

It is also notable that personal affinity with founding partners did not, by itself, guarantee a worker's access to informal decision-making mechanisms, as those who had strong friendships or even romantic bonds with founding partners were not included in informal high-level decision-making conversations. The history of managing the company and surmounting troubles together, that both Sohaib and Mariana described, were necessary for the emergence of the special relationships binding founding partners together. The kind of trust Sohaib described as arising between founding partners could not only be accumulated over time, however, as it depended on sharing responsibilities and anxieties. Significant moments in time, such as founding the company or hiring employees, made founding partners feel personally responsible for the company. For instance, Mariana described to me her anxiety in letting go of some work responsibilities to colleagues who had joined the company more recently. She said, 'Others feel like claiming their space within the company. They are equipped to do it, and I cannot keep on taking their space. At the same time, I am anxious all the time about it knowing the responsibility that I have towards [shareholders] and the space.' This was the same Mariana who had recounted to me in the interview how shareholders had selected her to manage the company's operations. She now found herself at the intersection of the incompatible moral values, those of the capitalist market and CD's shared set of ethical values. Even if she delegated managerial responsibilities to other technically qualified workers, she still felt personally responsible for outcomes vis-à-vis shareholders.

Her responsibilities towards shareholders made her the custodian of the capitalist market value of profitability, while the organizational culture's values required that she let others claim their space.

Sohaib described the anxiety he felt when he sensed that workers were not doing well. He told me,

'If a worker tells me that they are not happy at work, I get anxious. The work of maintaining people's well-being increases my anxiety to scary levels. I get anxious when I talk to you and you tell me I'm always working on my project, and I am not able to allocate time for my thesis. I feel guilty, I automatically feel responsible for this. I also worry about the company and the financials. We have a 2-month lifeline and if we don't get any new projects the company will have to close down, but people are tired, and they need the time to grieve after the explosion. Do I push them to develop proposals in a time like this?'

Having contributed to hiring most of CD's workers, Sohaib's feeling of responsibility, and thus anxiety, extended towards them, and not only shareholders. Additionally, he felt personally accountable to translate the company's culture into working systems, as he cited to me the desire to create a community based on his own values as a key motivator for him to participate in founding the company. For instance, after he used the word 'staff' to designate employees and differentiate them from partners in the interview I conducted with him, Sohaib expressed to me feeling guilty for making that distinction. Acknowledging a hierarchy within CD not only made him feel that he failed as a manager in implementing a managerial system in the company, but also that he had failed his colleagues and betrayed his own values. The intimate connection between founding partners' ethical beliefs and the company's culture thus made them feel responsible for the organizational culture's moral values. The historical role that founding partners played within the company, and the commitments they made towards investors, each other, employees, and themselves conveyed to them a sense of

personal responsibility that they found difficulties sharing. Additionally, founding partners' personal sense of responsibility towards both sets of values—those associated with the capitalist market and those related to the organizational culture—bolstered their urge to consolidate their own managerial power in order to maintain these commitments. It thus structurally reproduced their position of power within the hierarchy based on aristocratic logics, and countered the values of partnership and flexibility they intended to enact within the workplace.

E. Conclusion

Adopting a set of moral values at work triggered a constant work of mediation between ideals workers aspired to achieve and the reality of everyday practices, norms, and systems. As workers interpreted the abstract values of partnership, non-hierarchy, and participatory decision-making and translated them into working systems, they found themselves in a double bind, as they operated at the intersection of incompatible value realms (Bateson et al. 1956). Indeed, their ethical commitment to the company's organizational culture and the capitalist market's values of profitability and efficiency often clashed. In trying to mediate between these conflicting value realms, workers introduced a meritocratic hierarchy conferring power to workers based on their work responsibilities. Another hierarchy based on the ownership of the means of production coexisted with the meritocracy and even replaced it in some circumstances. Founding partners also deployed aristocratic logics to avoid losing their power within the workplace, thus undermining the value of partnership and countering the flexibility they intended to model within the workplace.

The overlap of workplace hierarchies put employees in a double bind, and required that they flexibly adapted their workplace roles and responsibility to counter the rigidity resulting from the concentration of power at the level of partners. Employees who accepted the barriers limiting their participation as the realistic order of things, both limited their ability to learn and grow within the organization, and reproduced a managerial system excluding them from decision-making. Those who conversely took the value of partnership seriously ended up feeling disappointed and frustrated. Finally, when taken seriously the moral values at work constantly hinted at absences, as comparing reality to ideals made employees aware of the decisions they did not participate in and the information they did not have access to. Yumna argued that while practically unachievable, explicitly committing to the values of participation and non-hierarchy prevented anyone from assuming a position of absolute power within the workplace. Workers' expressions of frustration and anger when encountering gaps between reality and ideals were therefore features, not bugs, of the organizational culture as these expressions allowed workers to rethink working systems and realign them with the company's set of ethical values. Indeed, workers recognized the value of these expressions in maintaining the organizational culture, and thus frequently invited each other to express their feelings, give feedback, and engage in difficult conversations.

CHAPTER III

VALUING WORK WAGES, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AND CARE

‘There is an unsaid agreement, a consensus, that we all pass through this thing [intense periods of overwork]. Let’s take the example of the project you and Maya worked on last summer. You delivered a full project in two weeks while handling other assignments. You got tired, maybe you didn’t sleep. You took on an extra load, no one forced you to do it. You could have just said that you didn’t want to do it, but it’s the company’s culture that you accept this. It’s an agreement between everyone that sometimes we will get tired, sometimes we won’t have time for ourselves.’

As I transcribed the above section of my interview with Sohaib, I felt angry that he portrayed my experience on the said project as part of an agreement I had consented to. Given my position as his interviewer, I could not argue with him. Maya and I had worked for long hours ending late at night for two consecutive weeks, weekends included, after a client requested that we write two papers and present them on short notice. After the project ended, I spent months trying to recover, and make up for being late on my other projects. I had told my colleagues that I never wanted to experience that level of stress and overwork again. Yet, Sohaib presented the experience as a usual, perfectly acceptable occurrence exemplifying our working conditions. He was not wrong, as hard work characterized employment at CD. Alicia told me about a busy period where she worked from 10am till 10pm, and Jenny described frequently pulling all-nighters to meet work deadlines. Dina reported spending a month working intensely through weekends and evenings, without being able to spend time with her parents and friends. Workers often described these periods of *aaj’a*—or harriedness—using metaphors that represented them as life-threatening, such as suffocating, drowning,

burning, losing the ability to breathe, and cutting oneself and bleeding. What motivated workers to work, and put themselves through experiences they described with such intensity? Why did I accept working on that project and on many subsequent ones that put me through similar situations of *aaj'a*?

The above questions might seem to have a trivial answer. One might argue that workers worked to earn wages, and that their experiences of overwork stemmed from their employer's work discipline, as they merely complied to requirements dictated through the economic relationship of exchanging labor for wages. Examining the reality of workers at CD complicates such a view, however. First, a flexible mode of labor management introduced ambiguity within the employment relationship. In the absence of formal bosses and job descriptions, workers often adopted practices of self-management to impose a work discipline on themselves. They tried to guess the content and amount of work that they needed to contribute to the workplace in return for their wages, and they tried to meet those estimated expectations. Their employer only contributed partially to imposing certain productive rhythms. Moreover, factors exceeding considerations related to the employment relationship influenced workers' productivity. Those stemmed from workers' economic considerations to develop as professionals and navigate a precarious labor market, and also from their affective and ethical commitments towards their colleagues and the world.

In examining workers' motivation to work, I turn to the concept of value. I am using here David Graeber's definition of value as "the way in which people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves" (2001, p.45). This definition centers individuals' motivations and their assessments of their own actions, and also accounts for the social recognition of value, as Graeber (2001) argues that value cannot be

realized in isolation from others. Value comes to be represented through value-forms, which are tangible forms that reflect the meaning of a person's action to themselves and elicit other people's desire, such as wages or a public accolade. In order to account for the ways in which workers value their own work, I therefore turn my ethnographic attention in this chapter to workers' assessments of the importance of their own work activities, and to the concrete material means by which they measured, realized, and made perceptible to others the sense of importance they ascribed to their work. I attend to the various ways workers discussed the importance of their work in the company and explained why they were overworked. I particularly examine workplace practices and systems as well as workers' perceptions as expressed in interviews. I argue that multiple, complementary means of valuing work coincided and motivated workers to work and overwork. For instance, workers exercised self-discipline to meet estimated employment requirements, they strived to develop as professionals and build a career, they fostered relationships of care and reciprocal interdependence with colleagues, and they tried to impact the world positively.

A. Working to Earn Wages

While all workers at CD, whether partners, employees, or interns, sold their ability to work to their employer, the sales' terms differed for workers belonging to each of the three groups, thus entailing three different modes of labor relations. Partners earned wages based on a daily rate that depended on their education, professional experience, and number of years working at the company. They calculated their number of working days in a given month and multiplied it by their daily rate to determine their wages for that month. If they worked on weekends or overnight, they earned higher

wages. If they got sick, went on vacation, or took parental leave, their wages dropped. Employees received a fixed salary that they negotiated upon employment and that remained unaffected by the time they spent working during a given month. Interns only earned compensation for their transportation, while contributing their labor for free. The three types of employment contracts did not specify a number of working hours that workers needed to contribute in exchange for wages, thus introducing flexibility in labor relations.

Additionally, contracts did not specify any job descriptions—a fixed list of work responsibilities workers committed to accomplishing. Apart from a small number of employees who performed routine duties related to managing the company, workers' tasks varied as they took on different consulting projects. A project lasted between a couple of days and a few years, and the work it entailed depended on requirements dictated by the different clients seeking the company's services. Therefore, the kind of work a consultant did changed regularly. The uncertainty and flexibility characterizing the company's consulting business model thus trickled down to labor relations, as ambiguity and change permeated terms of employment, and workers did not always know the amount or type of work their employer expected from them in exchange for wages. For instance, Edmond argued that the company's business model introduced cycles of fluctuating productivity, with periods where consultants had little work followed by others where they worked until 3am, seven days a week.

This labor management approach is not unique; it adheres to a mode of capitalist accumulation that rewards adaptable organizations introducing flexibility within their structures, production processes, social relations, and workers' recruitment (Kjaerulff, 2015). While flexibility in labor relations at CD generated ambiguity of expectations in

terms of working hours and work responsibilities, it did not prevent the employer from regulating workers' productivity. For instance, CD's management adopted workplace disciplines—that Aihwa Ong defines as the 'effect of the exercise of power in the interest of capitalist production' (1987, p.xi)—to regulate workers' productivity and maintain the company's profitability within a context of flexible work relations. A primary motivation for workers to work thus stemmed from their position within the employment relationship and their need to earn wages representing their labor' value.

I explore in this section CD's workplace disciplines regulating workers' activities and motivating them to work and overwork within a context of flexible labor relations. I build on E.P. Thompson's (1967) distinction between two modes of working, task-orientation and time-orientation. A task-orientation entails workers completing tasks because they see the necessity of doing so. They thus set personal objectives for their work and follow the rhythms of society and the non-human environment. Examples of a task-oriented approach to work include non-industrial farming activities, where a farmer has to harvest before thunderstorms, or a mother's work of caring for her child at a rhythm that depends on their emerging needs. Conversely, a time-oriented work discipline relies on the clock's impersonal mechanical function to regulate work activities. Following Tim Ingold's (1995) argument that both task and time orientations coexist within capitalism, I argue that CD's managerial systems for distributing labor and allocating projects to workers introduced a flexible configuration of a task-oriented discipline and a time-oriented one to incite workers to intensify their productive capacities. I also show that the coinciding forms of workplace disciplines introduced an ambiguity that animated labor struggles.

The flexibility of labor relations, and the trust-based organizational culture I describe in the first chapter prevented managers—enablers and catalysts—from tracking individuals’ workloads, and from regulating their productivity using supervision-based management techniques. In the absence of formal lines of authority, no worker could continually supervise another one, or instruct them on what to do during their working hours. Therefore, workers used a labor distribution system to allocate a fluctuating workload to individual workers while maintaining both fairness and a high level of productivity. The system relied on a complex set of interlinked Google Sheets where each worker listed their own planned tasks for upcoming weeks, along with the estimated time they predicted they would spend on each task. After adding up the time that every worker planned to work in a given week or month, the distribution system displayed each worker’s future workload in number of planned workdays. Aggregates of planned time constituted the basis for workload exchange during weekly meetings, where workers presented a table from Google Sheets including all their names and their individual planned time, compared the total number of planned days for each worker, and redistributed the workload to balance out everyone’s future work. An overworked worker, one with a high total of planned days in comparison to others, delegated tasks to another with a low total.

1. Time Discipline

Given that employment contracts did not specify a set number of hours workers needed to contribute to the company in exchange for wages, workers inferred their employer’s expectations based on their colleagues’ number of planned days displayed on the labor distribution system. As workers discussed their number of planned days in

weekly team meetings, they established an implicit norm of each worker working a minimum of five eight-hour days a week—an amount reflecting capitalism’s historical compromise with factory workers. Workers who had planned tasks exceeding forty hours per week expressed being harried and asked for support, and those who had fewer planned days offered support. A time discipline emerged out of the system for planning and distributing labor, therefore countering flexibility in labor relations. It helped the employer manage workers’ productivity by having those with less than five days’ worth of tasks take on more work. It also allowed workers to bound their working time, have more clarity regarding their employer’s expectations, and quantify their feeling of harriedness. Leila described to me how clocks regulated her productive activities, illustrating the operation of the workplace’s time discipline.

‘I am sitting at my laptop from 1pm to 5pm. My father calls me to help him fill the water tank, so I leave my desk, and once I’m back something else happens. I have to heat my lunch , and then work as I eat, but then my parents call me again, or the doorbell rings. When I report my working time, I find that I lost an hour and a half, so I deduct those, and only report having worked for the rest. I feel like I am working 24/7, but then I calculate my days and they only add up to half a month of productive work that I can claim wages for.’⁸

The need to meet the requirement of working forty hours per week introduced the clock as an instrument for measuring workers’ productivity, and regulating their lived experience of time. For instance, Leila split her afternoon into quantifiable time units that she associated either with wages-worthy work or other tasks related to household chores. Similarly, Mazen once told me that he excluded, when calculating his time spent working, the time periods when a headache slowed him down, when he

⁸ In this instance, Leila described her workday as she worked from home during the pandemic. While working from home had been an option for workers since the company’s inception, the uprising, pandemic, and economic collapse often forced workers during my fieldwork to work from their own apartments.

could not concentrate on a task because a meeting was coming up in half an hour, and when he sat on his desk trying to write a report but experienced writers' block. When calculating the productive time associated with wages to meet the norm of working for forty hours per week, workers transformed their lived experience into quantified abstract time units that they calculated using clocks or their clock-conditioned sense of passing time, and excluded activities and tasks that did not produce tangible outputs. The time discipline thus reified the divide between the work of production and that of reproduction even when those coincided in the same physical space.

The workplace's time discipline relied on workers observing their own work activities and practicing self-management. Each worker estimated and reported on the time needed to complete their tasks, took on extra work to plan for a forty-hour workweek, measured their own productivity, and disciplined their bodies to meet the minimum number of work hours their employer implicitly required in exchange for wages. Moreover, the above-described practices of calculating working time show that CD's workplace discipline did not only mandate a minimum number of hours to work in a given week, but also a productive rhythm to be met during those hours. For instance, a worker who spent time attempting to write but failed to produce sentences on their laptop's screen did not always account for this time as working time, because they did not produce any tangible output during that time. A normative productive rhythm therefore regulated work activities, as workers expected to achieve certain tasks within the time they spent working. When a worker estimated the time to do a future task through their individual planning exercise, they imposed on themselves the productive rhythm they aspired to meet. That rhythm however did not stem from their individual preferences, as they often had to discipline their bodies to work when they

felt unwell, or failed to write, at the risk of losing their wages or having to extend their working hours.

Workers inferred the productive rhythms they had to meet through the company's clients' requirements. Given that clients only paid CD after consultants delivered trainings, wrote reports, and conducted meetings according to contractually-set timelines, client deadlines imposed productive rhythms compelling workers to complete their tasks on time. For instance, my colleagues who developed project proposals argued that no consultant could bill a client more than five days to deliver a desk review. Exceeding this number would get the client to question the consultant's competence, as an expert in a certain topic would not need a long time to review existing publications on that topic. Client-enforced productive rhythms therefore matched a normative working pace within the development consulting market. Similarly, consultants working at CD could only exceed certain norms for delivering their tasks by a small margin at the risk of being perceived as not competent enough. Thus, the productive rhythm workers had to meet stemmed from the consulting market, clients' requirements, and an implicit normative working pace within CD.

2. Task Discipline

Given that workers felt the necessity to complete their tasks in order to deliver their consulting projects, and allow their employer to bill clients for their work, a task-oriented discipline coexisted with the workplace's time discipline. The normative productive rhythm imposed through the workplace's task discipline thus followed a social rhythm dictated by the company's financial cycles. Additionally, in order to maintain the company's profitability, enablers regulated workers' working pace by

relying on a project allocation process that complimented individuals' own planning and self-management practices. For instance, they assigned projects to workers when the company won a new bid, or when a project team asked for support from additional consultants to meet their deadlines.

Mariana who played a key role in project allocation described the process to me. She first reviewed running projects' plans to estimate, based on each consultant's tasks and the associated number of planned workdays workers' future levels of harriedness. She thus identified consultants with lighter future workloads and assigned them to projects needing additional resources. Mariana also considered in this allocation process workers' expertise, as she predicted their ability to deliver the assignment's requirements on time based on their previous work experiences. When she did not find any suitable worker to take on the additional workload, she suggested to hire a new employee or contract an external consultant to fill the gap. In reviewing the tasks each worker had to complete and estimating their future level of harriedness, Mariana superimposed the company's normative productive rhythms on workers' time estimates for their own tasks. Allocating more projects to workers increased the tasks they had to deliver within a certain period of time and thus forced them to accelerate their working pace, often through extending their working hours to meet their deadlines. For instance, Mazen argued that it was impossible to complete the work assigned to him in forty hours per week, so he often extended his workday or worked on the weekend to finish his project tasks. Similarly, Ali told me that managers assigned him to new projects, claiming that he had time to spare, even though he thought he had a full future workload. The project allocation process and the associated task-oriented discipline therefore increased workers' tasks, incited them to meet productive rhythms exceeding

their preferred working pace, and pushed them to extend their working hours to complete those tasks.

During a team meeting, Edmond asked if anyone would be willing to sign-up to work on an understaffed project that needed an additional consultant in the coming few months. I had overheard him ask Mariana earlier if anyone was available to work on the project, and she responded that everyone was busy but then named two employees who she thought would have time in the coming phase. In response to Edmond's request later at the team meeting, Dina, an employee, said that she found the assignment interesting and that she would have signed-up had she not been assigned to many other projects. A partner eagerly encouraged her to join, to which Dina replied, 'I am already overloaded. I can join if you take me off one of my projects.' Other partners joined in the conversation trying to convince her to sign-up; they listed the tasks she had to do on her current projects, and argued that her future workload was still manageable. Dina persistently protested that she did not have time to take on extra work reminding Mariana that they had already discussed the need to reduce her workload as she had been working for long hours over the past month. The latter responded, with a frustrated tone, that they had agreed that Dina would work on four projects not two.

The above vignette illustrates a labor struggle where Dina argued that her current projects filled her working time—referring to the time-oriented workplace discipline—and her employers maintained the need for a task-oriented discipline, where she would have to complete the tasks on four projects. Once a worker was allocated to a project, they held the responsibility to complete its client-mandated tasks and had their productive rhythm regulated through an associated task discipline following the project's pace. Consequently, employees' interest lay in adopting a time discipline bounding their workday—especially that their wages did not increase and they extended their working hours—and partners preferred a task discipline that regulates employees' productive rhythms. The ambiguity resulting from the coexistence of two work disciplines thus animated labor struggles between employees and partners acting as their employer.

The flexible nature of CD's labor relations and the reliance on self-management obscured the workplace's discipline, as individual workers self-managed their own working time and productive pace. Nonetheless, workers did intervene whenever they thought a colleague had failed to meet the company's normative productive rhythm or the required number of working hours, and thus made visible the workplace's discipline. For instance, when a worker who had committed to completing a task did not deliver it on time, their colleagues first asked them why that happened and tried to understand if they needed any support. When workers did not find a convincing excuse for a colleague's underperformance, they gave them feedback, and let them know how their behavior made them feel. Leila told me that she felt hurt when she received feedback, because that indicated that others thought she did not do her job well enough. Partners intervened whenever an employee repeatedly missed their deadlines and did not change their behavior even after receiving feedback. They scheduled a conversation with that person to try to understand the reasons behind their low productivity or the particular behaviors others complained about. In a few cases when the employee in question did not change their behavior after several rounds of feedback, partners asked them to leave the company. While Mariana thought that such decisions were painful, she saw them as necessary because a worker who underperformed negatively affected all others in the company. Moreover, Jenny told me that some colleagues who had resigned from CD had done so because they could not 'follow the rhythm.' Thus, failing to comply with the workplace's discipline sometimes led to workers losing their jobs.

B. Working to Accumulate Experience and Build Credentials

On a Monday morning, Aida, a newly-joined intern, asked a harried Mazen if she could support on the project he was working on. The latter,

desperate for help, scheduled a meeting with the intern, introduced the project, and explained that as he drafted the final report, he needed Aida to dedicate a few hours to data entry and creating graphs. Aida however argued that she was experienced and therefore did not want to do that kind of work but would rather contribute to writing the report. Mazen explained that at that point in a project with an imminent deadline, all Aida could help with was data entry, but she still refused to do that work.

Unpaid interns joined CD on a regular basis, with three to five interns working at the company at any point in time. Many interns were employed for months, working long hours including during weekends without receiving any pay beyond transportation fees. Explaining workers' motivation to work as merely complying with the requirements of an exchange relationship of work for wages thus falls short of justifying interns' engagement at CD. In a discussion about the above-described incident, Aida explained to me that did not want to do any 'junior tasks' as those would not develop her professionally. She wanted to dedicate her time at CD for work that would help her learn new skills and accumulate knowledge about the development sector so that she could better manage her own non-governmental organization in her home country. Similarly, Ron who interned at CD for six months expressed to me upon leaving the company his frustration about not receiving wages for his work, but then added that the internship had helped him develop his CV and 'shake the right hands' to find a better job in the future. Interns therefore ascribed value to their work as a means of developing their skills and building their professional networks, in order to improve their future prospects.

Waged workers also recognized the importance of their work in helping them develop professional credentials and social networks. For instance, Maya told me that she was not just spending time aimlessly at CD; she had joined the company because she wanted to develop her career, and she was 'hungry for colleagues to give her bigger

tasks and higher responsibilities.’ She therefore sought ways to direct her work efforts towards professional experiences she thought would stimulate her professional growth. For instance, given her interest in social policies, she only wanted to work on projects that would develop her expertise in that field. She thus valued work that contributed to her career and incremental accumulation of skills and expertise.

In tracking down their professional progression, workers hierarchically organized work tasks to reflect the level of experience required to perform each of them. For instance, Maya’s eagerness to take on bigger tasks shows her association of higher responsibilities with a sense of professional growth. Moreover, Aida’s refusal to do data entry stemmed from her perception of a mismatch between her qualifications as a worker and the kind of task she was asked to do. Mariana gave me another example of such a mismatch. She thought that for her to develop professionally and engage in high-level management, she needed to let go of certain tasks and delegate them to other, less experienced workers, who would themselves grow and move to higher levels of responsibility by taking on those tasks. When those she delegated her tasks to failed to complete them properly, she felt frustrated as following up on those tasks herself took her ten steps back, and hindered her own and her colleagues’ advancement. Workers at CD thus aspired to continuously seek bigger responsibilities matching their growing levels of experience. As they spent more years within the company, workers moved from helping other consultants on projects, to managing their own projects, to then handling client relationships, until they contributed to managing the company. Tasks falling at the higher end of the hierarchy entailed more proximity to the market, by having to deal with clients and manage the company’s finances. They were also associated with higher wages as recognition of their superior value. A yearly increase of

workers' wages thus asserted the necessity for them to perpetually grow and assume bigger responsibilities.

Increasing responsibilities often entailed greater visibility vis-à-vis clients, with workers communicating with senior professionals in other organizations, and having their names and CVs officially included in contracts. The value of higher-responsibility work was therefore also realized beyond the workplace through displaying one's name within professional networks, and developing their own brand as an expert. For instance, Yumna told me about the importance of learning skills that she could sell to future employers,

'I want to see that my career is growing, so I want to feel that what I do this year isn't what I did last year, that it's better, not just different [...] and I want to feel that if I entered this organization with two stars, I will exit it with five, but five that I can claim, five that I can go to another organization and say, look, I have five stars, not just internal values and competencies that my colleagues at CD praise me for, but things that I can be proud of in the world.'

Yumna's statement shows the sense of importance she ascribed to accumulating work experiences that future employers would recognize as useful. She did not want her current work to only be appreciated through her workplace's idiosyncratic means of valuing work. She also sought experiences she could show off in the labor market as incremental improvements over time forming a growing career. She therefore predicted the skills and areas of expertise that would be important in the future labor market, and chose work tasks that would help her develop professionally along those lines. She signed up for instance to work on developing project proposals because she thought that such work experiences would help her learn new skills and qualifications that future employers would recognize as valuable. Yumna's thinking about work as part of a long-term project of optimizing choices to accumulate valuable credentials illustrates Michel

Foucault's concept of the entrepreneur of the self (2004), whereby an individual adopts a utility-maximizing mindset to accumulate themselves as their own human capital, and manage their life as an economic project (Leins, 2019). Within a context of labor precarity, as the supply of secure jobs in a competitive labor market dwindles and risk is transferred from employers to workers, the latter feel the compulsion to use managerial techniques to assess and increase the exchange value of their future work (Leins, 2019; Horgan, 2021). A career-building worker thus complied simultaneously to two distinct sets of requirements, one that their employer dictated through the relationship of exchanging wages for labor, and another that they self-imposed to conform with the demands of professional development.

The two sets of requirements did not always align. Mazen described to me tensions arising between him and his employer about the kind of work he did at the company. While he was eager to work on certain tasks that would help him develop new skills and improve his career prospects, the company's interest lay in him spending the majority of his time doing tasks he had the skills and experience in. When he expressed his preferences, partners encouraged him to pursue career-advancing work, only to later incite him to optimize his work contribution by applying his existing skills. He thus thought that no one could completely forge their own path within the organization to build the career they desired. If they wished to develop particular skills and comply with the requirements of an entrepreneur of the self, workers had to take on an additional workload to that mandated by their employer. For instance, Mazen told me that he offered support to other colleagues, adding tasks to his own workload whenever he wanted to learn new things. In order to resolve the conflict arising from a different set of requirements, one imposed by the employer and the second mandated

through the need to develop one's own career, workers extended their own working hours. The broader context of employment precarity therefore intensified workers' productive rhythms and increased their workloads.

The value of productivity as a means to accumulate oneself as human capital did not merely stop at collecting professional credentials and social connections but also extended to an ethical commitment of crafting oneself as a productive professional. My colleagues ascribed a sense of importance to being busy experienced consultants. When telling me about their productivity, workers expressed a sense of pleasure and self-satisfaction about the times where they worked at a fast pace and scratched items off of their to-do lists. Conversely, they described feeling agony when they found themselves unable to match certain levels of productivity. Mariana told me for instance that 'it killed her' when she felt late, or thought that she was not doing as much work as she should. Workers did not tie such statements to any workplace requirements, but rather spoke of productivity as rewarding in its own right. Matching fast-paced productive rhythms helped them embody the ideal of productive professionals. For instance, David Graeber (2018) argues that a work-as-an-end-in-itself morality increasingly dominates ideas about work, and that many workers' sense of self-worth depends on working for a living. Krause-Jensen also proposes that changing perceptions about work result in workers seeing it as an experience of self-development and fulfillment that conveys a sense of meaning and personal achievement. Workers at CD thus ascribed meaning to their work as a means to develop their credentials, build professional connections, and become productive professionals.

C. Working out of a Sense of Workmanship and Care

In the first two sections, I explored how workers valued their work based on economic considerations related to earning wages and improving their employability prospects. I show in the following sections what gets overlooked when workers' motivation to work is explained only in economic terms. I argue that workers also ascribed meaning to their work exceeding its exchange value and its financial returns, whether in terms of wages or accumulated experience. Laura Bear (2014) argues that a sense of workmanship—or the ethics and affects of work emerging out of the act of labor—generates a duty of care towards colleagues and the world exceeding abstract representations of time. She shows how such duties shape technological interventions that Hooghly river pilots introduced to mediate the effects of declining river infrastructure resulting from neoliberal austerity measures. I document in the rest of this chapter the ways in which workers at CD developed, in their acts of labor a sense of workmanship similar to the one that Bear describes. Their ethical and affective commitments towards colleagues, the workplace as a collective, and the world often motivated them to exert effort exceeding requirements from their employer's work disciplines and their own entrepreneurial selves. Moreover, I examine institutional means that realize the value of work as a duty of care and make it perceptible and desirable to others.

1. Caring about Colleagues and the Collective

Edmond presented data about the company's finances to the team during the 2019 end-of-year retreat. He explained that the company was in a precarious financial situation. It had lost many upcoming contracts due to the crisis in Lebanon, and it was failing to collect debts from international clients who repeatedly delayed payments. Edmond wrote on the flipchart the monthly costs to run the company and the current

available liquidity—explaining that amassing this sum of money had only been possible because the company’s management had foreseen a crisis and refrained from distributing profits to shareholders over the past three years. He calculated, using the flipchart, that the company could survive for ten months without receiving any new payments. After a short silence, he reassured us that CD was doing ok, but that we needed to account for those numbers when planning for the coming year, and then asked for suggestions to help sustain the company.

In response, Maya suggested that we all needed to become business development experts to find new business opportunities, and to contribute to writing proposals. She added with an enthusiastic tone, ‘The design unit submitted 99 proposals last year alone.⁹ If we all participate, we would write many more. We can make a commitment, write one proposal every two weeks. Can five people commit to this?’ Ali volunteered eagerly and Nancy raised her hand. Maya exclaimed, ‘Who’s with me? Ali, Nancy, going once, going twice...’, and Edmond concluded, ‘Ok, Maya, Ali, and Nancy, take this as a commitment. Would you bet that we would grow by 30-50% next year?’ Others then volunteered to look for new business opportunities, and Edmond proposed starting a fund using company profits and a percentage of workers’ wages to help the company and individual workers in case of financial difficulties.

The above vignette shows an instance where workers took on extra work to help the company during a time of crises. Maya, Ali, and Nancy, who committed to developing proposals and thus increased their own workloads to secure new business opportunities were employees, who did not receive additional financial compensation for their extra efforts. During my time at CD, I often witnessed employees volunteer their work to help others and the company when they saw the need for it. Such instances show that workers’ motivation to work exceeded the need to earn wages and accumulate professional credentials. Eliane told me that workers had varying levels of commitment towards the collective; while some only did what they were asked for, others worked

⁹ Maya was referring here to the proposals that the design unit developed and submitted to potential clients. Most of CD’s projects started after clients reviewed the company’s submitted proposal, found it better than that of competitors, and initiated a consulting contract with the company. Workers at CD thus tracked the number of submitted proposals as it indicated the number of business opportunities they had formally expressed interest in, and thus helped them roughly estimate the company’s future income.

hard and ‘killed themselves’ because they had the passion to help the company succeed and they were inspired by other hardworking colleagues. In the following section, I document ways in which workers exerted efforts out of a sense of care towards the company and their colleagues.

During my fieldwork, workers often went through periods of overwork because they perceived the company’s future to be threatened. Edmond explained to me workers’ drive to work saying that the culture at the company was one of wanting to serve the most, rather than competing for positions of power. He thought that workers felt a sense of responsibility towards the collective which motivated them to contribute to its prosperity. Alicia reported in her interview feeling the pressure to match others’ ‘turbo’ working pace, saying that when Edmond explained the crises’ impact on the company, she felt the urge to do something about it, and to sign-up for additional tasks. Information about managerial decisions, company financials, client troubles, and profit distribution incited workers to operate at a level of analysis broadening their perspective beyond their work as individuals. After gaining a manager’s perspective, workers became aware of their labor as fitting within a collective project. Edmond often presented that project not as one of accumulating profit for shareholders but rather as creating a collaborative community, as evidenced by his emphasis on shareholders contributing their profits to deal with financial difficulties, and his suggestion to start a safety fund for the company and its workers. Consequently, workers often viewed the company as a mutually-dependent group of people for whom they felt responsible, rather than as an employer with whom they had a contractual economic relationship of exchanging wages for labor.

Some statements further encouraged workers to think of the company as a collective project they owned, rather than as an employer. Edmond told me that employees' future access to shares helped them develop a sense of ownership and a zealous entrepreneurial attitude towards the company. He presented the possibility for co-owning the company during a team retreat saying, 'you are not working for capital, you are capital.' Nonetheless, workers sometimes openly rejected adopting the view of their workplace as a collective. For instance, during a session about the company's culture, Mazen argued that he did not always want to know about the company's financials because this knowledge made him feel responsible for CD's financial status while he had not signed up to play this role within the organization. In this case, Mazen defined his work responsibilities, refused to address problems exceeding his perceived scope of work, and thus countered the flexibility in labor relations.

While Edmond and Eliane thought that workers' passion towards the company as a collective project motivated them to work hard, employees often explained taking on extra tasks as an effort to help overwhelmed colleagues. For instance, Alicia described in her interview how she acted after feeling the pressure to help during the financial crisis. She offered support whenever anyone asked for it during the weekly team meeting. A colleague who knew that she already had a lot of work told her what she was doing was stupid and asked her why she would sign-up for extra tasks when she was already working from 10am to 10pm every day. But Alicia could not stop herself from volunteering because once in the team meeting, when an overwhelmed worker asked for support and no one answered, she felt the compulsion to jump in and offer help. She added that at the time, a technical glitch in the labor distribution system's Google Sheets made the situation even worse. The system was not adding all of her

planned days for the coming week, so if she had planned six days of work, the sheet would only display three. She thought that whoever asked for support would see that she had the lowest number of planned days amongst workers, and expect her to help without knowing that her week was already overbooked. Alicia thus offered her support because of her concern about overwhelmed colleagues, and also because she wanted to be perceived as contributing as much as others.

Alicia had expressed her concern about matching colleagues' level of work in a team meeting where she told us that she felt guilty when others were overloaded and she had a 'normal' workload. When I reminded her of that instance, she commented that she felt bad when for example Dina said in a team meeting that she could not breathe all weekend, while she had had a 'cool weekend and a chill week before that.' Alicia added that because the company's culture was one of supporting each other, she felt in such instances that others were doing everything for the company, while she was not doing enough. She then told me that she felt better about herself during the period where she was overwhelmed, 'I shut my laptop at night thinking, *khay*, I did all I could, I did not fail anyone.' Alicia perceived the company as a collective project, where the total workload should be distributed equally between different workers. If she did not contribute enough, she would be failing others.

Edmond told me that team meetings were a key site where workers felt their responsibility towards the group, because they wondered if they were contributing as much as others. He gave me an example of this sense of responsibility,

'Mariana apologized because she was getting married, which is powerful. She's getting married, she doesn't have to apologize to anyone, but she felt that somehow, she didn't contribute as much as others, so she overloaded them, and she needs to be conscious of this, so the apology is more of a recognition than an apology. This is social accountability.'

Edmond's statement shows that workers perceived having a lower productivity than that of an overworked colleague as overloading them and thus contributing to their *aaj'a*, hence Alicia's feeling of guilt when she was not as harried as others. Being socially accountable therefore required workers to constantly gauge their contribution against that of others, and try to match it.

The culture of supporting each other encouraged workers to view labor as sharing a burden with colleagues, and obscured the responsibility of the company as an employer in their experience of overwork. When a worker felt overwork as suffocating, drowning, and burning,¹⁰ other workers were less likely to perceive the company as squeezing their labor for profit, and more likely to question their own contribution to the workplace and feel personally responsible for that person's suffering. As a consequence, when a worker was overworked, others would try to match their level of work to feel less guilty about their own contribution, resulting in all workers being overworked. Sohaib explained to me how he tried to break the overwork cycle. He thought that employees often perceived partners to be working all the time, himself included. He wanted to challenge that perception especially because he thought that it lacked grounds and therefore led to everyone else trying to match wrong ideas about his contribution. He therefore intentionally said in some meetings that he worked less than

¹⁰ I suspect that workers implicitly accused, through the life-threatening metaphors describing overwork, their employer and/or colleagues of putting them through the hardships of overwork. Lila Abu Lughod (2016) argues in her book 'Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society' that quoting poetry allowed Bedouins to speak publicly about their personal feelings without that personal character being impugned. Workers used the life-threatening metaphors often without specifying who perpetrated the threat. For instance, Leila once explained in a team meeting that she was overwhelmed by work, and concluded with an emotional tone that she was suffocating. In this case, the metaphor showed Leila's colleagues that the work she was offering the company was putting her life at risk; her 'life-threatening' work in this case constituted a gift that was impossible to reciprocate. These metaphors thus realized the value of overwork, and implicitly implicated the company, and maybe even colleagues, in making a worker suffer.

five days during the week to normalize the practice. Alicia, an employee, confirmed to me Sohaib's suspicions, saying that she felt that she had to be running all the time, because partners were always running. One year after joining the company, she went through a period of overwork and felt that she had finally reached 'the heart of CD' because she was just as overwhelmed as partners. The feeling of being overworked therefore contributed to creating a sense of belonging to the company as a collective.

Workers often took on extra work because they felt the urge to help colleagues, match their level of productivity or harriedness, and contribute to the company as a collective project. The meaning they ascribed to their own work activities in this case was not only related to earning wages and producing outputs, but also stemming from socialities of care towards their colleagues and a feeling of responsibility towards a group they belonged to. The commitments workers had towards their work therefore had an affective and ethical character. The workplace adopted different mechanisms to acknowledge the meaning of work as caring for one's colleagues and employer, and to recognize this form of work's value. For instance, workers often publicly expressed their gratitude towards those working with them, and celebrated their achievements. Such celebrations often happened in team meetings or over the office's WhatsApp group. One worker would thank team members working with them on a certain project upon completing a major milestone, such as delivering a training, finishing data collection, or writing a report. They would often compliment aspects of their colleagues' working style, express enjoying working with them, or praise the quality of the output. Those being celebrated often complimented the person initiating the celebration, and many joined in to share encouraging words or clap, either in person or using emojis.

Mentioning someone's name in a group celebration made their contribution visible to other team members so that they would recognize the value of their work as an act of caring, such as swooping in to support in writing a report on short notice, giving advice on how to deal with a difficult client, or sharing helpful contacts. As a worker's name reoccurred in celebrations, others including those not directly working with them, appreciated their work and their contributions to the workplace. Colleagues' evaluations of a worker's work, including the outputs they produced, the kind of relationships they fostered with their team, and their working pace extended over time to the worker, and developed their workplace reputation. Workers therefore started perceiving others as hardworking, pleasant to work with, trustworthy, organized, helpful, and innovative, but also sometimes unreliable, bad at communicating, messy, nonchalant, or slow. It is notable that the dynamics of workers' celebrations that created workplace reputations resembled the name enunciation associated with the circulation of *kula* gifts. Alfred Gell (1998) argues that *kula* operators whose names traveled far and wide, through the valuables they were attached to, gained influence over the calculations of *kula* exchanges, even in faraway places. He adds that the prestigious *kula* valuables indexed the operator's commanding powers and even his bodily beauty. Similarly, workplace celebrations indexed a worker's qualities, including hard work, sociability, and competence. They also conferred to workers the ability to influence others given these perceived qualities. The value of work thus becomes political in this case, as it confers power to individual workers within the workplace.

While group celebrations contributed to building positive reputations, conversations in smaller groups or one-on-one gossip exchanges perpetuated negative ones in a less public manner, as workers complained about teammates and told others

how they failed to meet certain productivity expectations. When a worker developed a reputation of not contributing enough to the collective, others punished them informally for their failure to care. For instance, Edmond thought that an unreliable and unproductive worker would feel that others did not want to work or socialize with them. They would no longer ask them to work on projects, nor assign them tasks, so they would eventually leave the company. Having free time therefore indicated that a worker was not sought after, while being asked to do a lot of work showed that one's colleagues recognized the value of their previous work. They had enjoyed working with that person before, and thus wanted to work with them again. I thus suspect that Alicia's satisfaction with her experience of overwork partially stemmed from a feeling that others recognized her previous work's value and trusted her with more work. Harriedness thus made workers feel valued, desired, and sociable. It also reinscribed their social bonds with their colleagues, as overworking demonstrated their commitment to the collective and allowed them to reciprocate others' hard work. These affective and ethical commitment to work thus help explain workers putting themselves in situations they often described as life-threatening.

2. Caring about the World and the Social Value of Work

Towards the end of August 2020, my colleagues and I experienced an intense period of overwork because we had to submit a labor market assessment report with a tight deadline. Maya worked on weekends. I spent my vacation days writing the report in a small hot kitchen, watching my friends hang out by the pool outside. Rania, who was on holiday with her family filled in her report sections during the nights. While national labor market assessments required months for developing a methodology, administering surveys, and conducting interviews, CD's client had requested that we send him the assessment's results within a month of hiring us. He argued, with an authoritative tone over a patchy online call that pandemic-related delays had exacerbated his organization's lengthy bureaucratic process of selecting a consulting

company to conduct the assessment. As a result, the time to start the research had been delayed. He could not however extend the deadline for submitting our findings because he needed those to design curricula for the academic year starting in October. If we were late to submit our assessment, many young people would enroll in vocational training programs that were irrelevant to employers' needs, and would therefore have a lower chance of securing jobs upon graduating.

Clients often created a sense of urgency for workers at CD by emphasizing the importance of consultants' work to the world. When we worked late at night, on weekends, or during a vacation, it often was to help young people find jobs, train local organizations to improve their programs' effectiveness, or reform policies affecting refugees' and migrant workers' terms of employment. Operating in the public policy, public management, and development sectors, clients often shared narratives of how their work, and subsequently ours benefitted broader society, and even sometimes engaged us in measuring and reporting that impact to justify spending public funds to their donors. Moreover, partners at CD presented the company as a social enterprise, a for-profit company aiming to create 'social value.' For instance, CD's founders often mentioned that their drive to generate greater social impact motivated them to leave more lucrative and stable jobs to found the company. Many had also chosen consulting as a way out of a political deadlock they encountered as political activists.

The company's clients and founders therefore emphasized the social value of workers' everyday activities. In the above vignette, the sense of urgency that had me and my teammates experience overwork stemmed from the importance we ascribed to our work's effects on the world, or the use value of our report. During my time at CD, project timelines were often squeezed because clients needed to spend their funds by a

certain deadline,¹¹ a bureaucratic government agency had taken a long time to respond due to staff shortage, or someone needed the products of our labor to use urgently before a cabinet resigned or an academic year started. Bear (2014) argues that the heterochronic character of capitalist time provokes workers to attempt to reconcile diverse incongruent temporal rhythms through their labor. Consultants at CD illustrated Bear's argument, as they extended their working hours and intensified their own productive capacities to mediate conflicting rhythms of bureaucratic donors, the company's financial cycles, the public sector in times of austerity, and the imminent needs of beneficiaries to deliver their work in time for it to be useful.

Workers' sense of care about the impact of their work often motivated them to exert efforts exceeding clients' expectations to make sure their interventions had high quality, and therefore good effects on the world. For instance, they engaged more beneficiaries than required for projects to be inclusive or conducted additional interviews to contextualize training material. Workers thought that their willingness to exert additional efforts for their work to be inclusive, context-relevant, participatory, innovative, and sustainable, among others, differentiated CD from other consulting companies. They often mentioned those indicators of quality in their proposals for new projects and conversations with clients. Alicia also told me that unlike colleagues at her previous job in another public management consulting company, workers at CD actually cared about their work's impact beyond just meeting clients' requirements. Dedicating time to work thus often became an ethical and affective engagement towards the world rather than a mere response to abstract regimes of time discipline.

¹¹ Many of CD's clients were international agencies and organizations that adopted strict financial procedures. For instance, yearly budgets expired if not spent by a certain deadline, and spending budgets required a lengthy process of justifying the expense. The development industry standard even prevented many clients from paying for consultants' work before receiving and validating deliverables.

Over my time at the company, workers developed various mechanisms to assess their work's social impact, and make it visible to colleagues, clients, and anyone visiting the company's website, thus realizing the social value of that work. The sector the company operated in often mandated workers' drive to measure their work's social value. For instance, donors often required measuring the social change that their investments produced, by reporting on the number of people answering a survey, the improvement in training participants' knowledge of a certain topic, or the number of events organized to disseminate research findings. Conversations about impact at CD abounded and addressed both indicators similar to the ones mandated by clients and workers' own sense of the usefulness of their work activities when for instance beneficiaries expressed their enthusiasm to attend their sessions, an employability training participant texted them to tell them they had found a job, or a donor agency employee informed them that their research findings were useful in designing new programs. Workers often celebrated in team meetings such instances, as they relayed the positive feedback they received and explained how their project would contribute to solving social problems.

Workers also developed a tool where they reported on their projects every week, and answered a question on how the project was relevant and important to the world. Answering the question and discussing answers in the team meeting incited workers to consider and express the sense of their work's importance, and to realize the value of that work by making it visible to colleagues. They explained for instance how working on a certain project helped local organizations survive the financial crisis, designed inclusive social protection programs, and identified youth needs to inform donors' future interventions. Workers discussed those statements linking their work to its impact

on the world during team meetings, and included them on the company's website to render its social value visible. They also discussed the company's impact during yearly retreats where they celebrated affecting the lives of thousands of people, training municipalities, presenting at conferences, and drafting laws.

Nonetheless, my colleagues did not always think of their work as useful, or worth the suffocating experience of overwork. For instance, Mariana asked me during a period where I was overworked and exhausted about the stakes of taking a break and submitting my report a few days late. She then added that we were not doctors, so no one's life depended on my timely submission. When faced with the experience of *aaj'a*, workers sometimes challenged the sense of urgency they felt, and even the importance of their own work. Additionally, workers sometimes questioned the social value of their work activities, as they did not think that they contributed positively to society. They sometimes complained that a policy they had produced would end up in some drawer, that their work would be used to polish a government's image without producing any positive social effects, or that development funds could have been better spent elsewhere. In such instances, they often faced the sense of uselessness of their work by highlighting other aspects of the work's value such as building their own professional credentials, or developing the company's contacts to find new, more impactful future projects.

Where one means of valuing work failed, and the worker could not sense their work's importance, they relied on others to ascribe meaning to their efforts. The different meanings of work, including earning wages, building professional credentials, feeling a sense of belonging to a group, and improving the world, therefore complemented each other and allowed me and my colleagues to justify our experiences

of overwork. Nonetheless, these different meanings for work sometimes all failed at sustaining workers' interest in their job. Notably, some workers who consistently questioned the usefulness of their work and its value to society left the company or vocally considered alternative careers, citing a desire for greater power in affecting society, or aspirations to contribute to radical change beyond what they saw as possible from within CD.

D. Conclusion

Going back to my opening vignette, I realize that I accepted to overwork on that project because that working experience gave me the opportunity to present myself as a national expert on the topic, and add that experience to my CV, which I thought advanced my employment prospects within a precarious labor market. Moreover, accepting to do a project in a new sector that CD had few credentials in opened up new business possibilities for my employer, and helped sustain the company and secure my livelihood and that of my colleagues. Even though I did not think that the project would have particularly positive effects on the world, and I realized that I was contributing more work than was expected of me in exchange for wages, other forms of valuing work motivated me to meet the project's deadline regardless of my personal discomfort.

In this chapter, I have examined the myriad of ways in which workers ascribed importance to their work activities, and the mechanisms by which their employer, colleagues, clients, and beneficiaries realized the value of that work. Contrary to a traditional view of work as a mere response to abstract regimes of time discipline, I argue that workers at CD also valued their work as means of crafting themselves as professionals, belonging and caring for a collective, and contributing positively to the

world. My interlocutors therefore did not only see their work as a mere economic activity, but also as an affective and ethical engagement towards their colleagues and broader society. When one means of valuing labor failed, workers relied on others to ascribe meaning to work activities that took up a large chunk of their time, and often put them through physical and emotional hardships.

CHAPTER IV

INSTITUTIONALIZED SOCIALITIES BRINGING THE HEART TO WORK

‘[My personal and professional lives] are too interlinked, with the coaching and the support and the friendships. It doesn’t annoy me though, quite the opposite. Most of my friends left Lebanon [...], and I got disappointed by a couple of other friends, then CD came in and took on a lot of space in my life. I feel surrounded, I gained new friends, and I don’t really see a distinction [between the personal and the professional]. Sometimes I need a break, to go and see another group of friends so I don’t spend all of my time with the people I work with, but today, CD comes first, before my friends [...] if I’m not applying to a Master’s, it’s only because I don’t want to leave CD. If I’m still in Lebanon, it’s because I’m attached to this job.’

Alicia described to me with the above statement her attachment to CD and her relationship to the workplace. While normative ideals of professionalism required that workers constructed a boundary between personal and professional aspects of their lives, keeping personal problems outside of the workplace, Alicia described a different reality at work. Indeed, CD’s workplace practices mandated that workers participated in sharing information about their emotional states and personal lives, and that they empathized with others, and offered them support when needed. These practices, which I will call the institutionalized practices of sociality included a weekly round of feelings, coaching relationships, and mechanisms for seeking and offering support. When explaining how these practices came to be, workers often pointed to a particular school of management and organizational development outlined in a book called ‘Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used,’ by Peter Block (2011). Block writes in his consulting guidebook that a foundational concept for his approach was sustaining the connection between the heart and the head, and ‘genuinely’ caring about

one's consulting clients. Sohaib highlighted in my interview with him the importance of Block's ideas to CD, saying that the company's connection to the approach of bringing 'the heart and the mind' to work had allowed it to survive subsequent crises. He added,

'At CD, we always discuss the soft side. We observe dynamics, we talk about feelings and put them on the table. Every year we also have a couple of reminders about this, whether in the Flawless Consulting training, or in the retreat, or even the weekly soft things like asking 'how do you feel', or the reaction to the Beirut explosion, telling people, take two weeks off if you are annoyed [...] It is both a general conviction that this is what keeps us going, and it is who we are. I want to empathize with people, I am an empathetic person, and I want to integrate it in a company system, so I can live it more.'

Workers' view of the heart and the mind at work represented an attempt at bridging the professional and the personal aspects of their lives, which they saw as separate but intimately connected. Thus, the 'soft' side Sohaib presented encompassed workers' emotional states, personal lives, workplace dynamics, and relationships with clients and corresponded to bringing the 'heart' to work. Conversely, the 'technical' side related to consulting projects and managing the company entailed engaging 'the mind.' Partners at CD often presented the approach of managing the technical aspects of work while closely attending to the 'soft' side as a 'human-centered approach' to management where both individuals' wellbeing and economic considerations informed decision-making. They justified the adoption of this approach using an ethical line of argument, considering empathy and connectedness to be moral values that are desirable for their own sake. Partners often also demonstrated the importance of a human-centered approach to management using utilitarian arguments highlighting a causal relationship between workers' well-being and their productivity, as well as the necessity of resolving arising conflicts for the company's survival.

In this chapter, I investigate the set of institutionalized practices inciting workers to bring their ‘hearts and minds’ to work. I particularly examine workers’ interpretations of these practices, the resulting forms of workplace socialities, their co-optation in the interest of capital, and emerging resistances. I build in this chapter on Marcel Mauss’ (2002) work on reciprocity. I examine work at CD as an exchange and a ‘total’ social fact simultaneously entailing moral, aesthetic, political, judicial, and economic dimensions. Studying work through the lens of exchange sounds trivial at first since paid work is by definition an exchange of labor for wages. Nonetheless, I move beyond this narrow conception of work and investigate broader considerations at work, namely emerging socialities, mutual obligations, ethical commitments, and transfers of political resources. Examining work as an exchange construes it as an inherently moral and social activity that produces, reproduces, and transforms cultural life and socialities (Kjaerulff, 2015). It thus enables a move beyond the essentialist divide between the social and the economic and decenters analyses in which the world of kinship and non-capitalist institutions is presented as radically different than market-based socialities (Kjaerulff, 2015; Bear et al., 2015). Even though I start from an analytical framework that does not inscribe binarized differences between the social and the economic—and the associated gift/commodity, short-term/long-term binaries—I still use these categories when my interlocutors expressed their relevance as they interpreted exchanges and social relationships at work.

Anthropologists have complicated a common argument that contemporary flexible capitalism disembeds the economy from other social relations and value realms. They cogently argue that reciprocity is central to the operation of capitalist social relations of production, and that the alienable aspect of labor has always

depended on its inalienable ties to a broader social context (Kjaerulff, 2015; Narotzky, 2015). Gift-like socialities and their underlying moral obligations have thus always coincided with and sustained economic relationships. Kjaerulff (2015) pays particular attention to long-term socialities within flexible capitalism, where profit depends on the flexible configuration of organizational structures, internal operations, and employment relationships. He argues that ‘gift-like’ moralities and socialities proliferate in and sustain the intense commoditization of labor within flexible capitalism. Moreover, Susana Narotzky (2015) argues that flexible accumulation has introduced new ways of exploiting reciprocal relations through entangling social values and material interests, and thus creating a new kind of ambivalent reality. The relationships between labor and capital are thus neither presented nor experienced as fully commodified, but rather as a mystified form of personalized relations (Narotzky, 2015; Narotzky, 1997). Building on her ethnographic fieldwork in Catalan family farms, Narotzky (2015) adds that the ambiguity at the intersection of care values and profit values is not a novel feature of flexible capitalism. Flexible modes of production have nonetheless undermined the apparent complementarity between those value regimes, and put their associated obligations in competition with one another.

I thus examine throughout this chapter how my interlocutors saw values related to care and profit as complimentary and in competition with one another. Inspired by anthropologists who examined workplace exchanges within flexible capitalist contexts, I document CD’s workplace socialities, and the various ways in which they sustained the commoditization of labor. I show that these socialities oriented workers towards increased productivity, supported mechanisms for flexible labor distribution, and reproduced power relations within the workplace. Additionally, I document a different

origin of long-term bonds within flexible capitalism. Anthropological accounts of long-term socialities in flexible capitalism often suggest that these socialities proliferate in response to precarity, as they remain a key means of securing a living (Martin, 2015; Cross, 2015). My ethnographic data shows that a particular school of management incited workers at CD to develop institutionalized practices that deliberately produced, managed, and enclosed socialities,¹² exchanges, and emotional expressions for the purpose of capital accumulation.

A. Bringing the Heart to Work

My colleagues and I met in the office for our weekly team meeting on a hot and humid Monday morning in July 2020. The doors leading to the balcony were open, and the circular chain of twenty-or-so people sitting in office chairs extended outdoors. The room was dark. The lights and the air conditioners were off, as the power had been out at the office and in most of the country for most of the past week. A few workers fanned their red tired faces with notepads. Our meeting started with the ‘round of feelings’ when Yumna asked the group ‘how do you feel?’ Sohaib intervened saying that the feelings section had turned into a session where everyone reported on their weekend, so he thought we were doing well, only to discover a few days into the week that ‘people were unhappy and cursing the company.’ He invited us to interpret the question differently, to think about what motivated us to work, and what frustrated us. Yumna called our names, one after the other, and each of us spoke for a bit about our feelings, personal updates, or the country’s multiple crises. The power outages had gotten Nancy to consider leaving the country. Radio ads about reliable security, electricity, and garbage collection services reminded Mazen of the civil war and incited him to leave too. Leila was constantly anxious, so was I. Alicia said she had a difficult emotional weekend but did not elaborate, and Ali, who lived in the South, told us that his family feared a new war with Israel given recent developments at the border, while he just felt numb. Maya then mentioned that the man who had committed suicide in Hamra last week kept her looking for any source of hope. The suicide had deeply affected Mariana as well who had spent her weekend crying. She then explained that she had rescheduled the coaching sessions with me and Maya on Friday because she felt completely hopeless, and had

¹² I use in this chapter the term ‘enclosure’ in reference to Marx’s ‘enclosure of the commons,’ or the removal of peasants’ common rights over land.

nothing to tell us. She added that she generally moved away from the group when she felt bad but this time she was trying not to, as her only solace was that we were going through this together. Yumna and Maya teared up with her last sentence. As others spoke, many cried and tissues were passed around the table. I cried at one point, and Hassan, a new intern I had just met that morning put a comforting hand on my shoulder, imitating many who had done the same to those sitting next to them. Sohaib expressed feeling frustrated that everyone was giving up on the country, and that no one wanted to fight back anymore. Hassan then asked to be added to the office's WhatsApp group and the meeting slowly moved into discussions about projects, clients, and the company's future plans.

The above vignette illustrates the team meeting's round of feelings, a key practice of institutionalized sociality at CD inciting workers to invoke their heart at work, express their feelings, and empathize with each other every week. Thankfully, the round of feelings was often less dramatic than the one I describe above. Every Monday morning, my colleagues and I attended a team meeting that started with a 'round of feelings' before moving on to discussing matters related to the company's operations, client relations, running project updates, and labor distribution. A designated facilitator typically asked the group 'how do you feel?' and attendees answered the question one after the other. Some gave succinct responses describing their emotional states, such as feeling happy, motivated to work, tired, sad, angry, or anxious. Others reported at length about their past week, mentioning how they were feeling about work, political and current affairs, and events in their personal lives like hosting a friend visiting from abroad, celebrating their kid's birthday, or caring for a sick parent. Workers often interpreted passing one's turn as them feeling unwell, and therefore needing further one-on-one follow-up.

Eliane, whose responsibilities as an enabler explicitly included maintaining workers' well-being described in her interview how she reacted to workers'

contribution in the round of feelings, ‘I listen to the voice, but also behind the voice to know that this person is tired, or that one is sad.’ Alicia expressed in her interview her surprise at Eliane’s ability to sense her need for help, ‘the round of feelings is online, you cannot see me, I’m talking normally, still, Eliane senses that I am not doing ok and calls me after. This ability to read people and to react, to take action is precious.’ Characterizing as ‘precious’ Eliane’s ability to sense and interpret affective cues in colleagues’ facial expressions, corporeal movements, and tones of voice shows the value that Alicia ascribed to CD’s institutionalized socialities.

Workers also became aware of information about colleagues’ personal updates and emotional states through other institutionalized practices such as coaching. Every worker was assigned a coach, thus creating coach-coachee bonds between colleagues. Workers often described their coaching relationships as sites to plan their professional development, manage workplace relationships and conflicts, and address personal problems and struggles. Additionally, workers also became aware of others’ needs and troubles through socialities that emerged organically in the workplace. For instance, Sohaib described how he learned about a colleague’s difficulties. He had not talked to Leila in a while during the lockdown. He ran into her in the office, had lunch with her, and realized by spending time together, without asking any direct questions, that she was tired. He noted to himself that she needed to rest and thus have a lighter workload in the future. Sohaib considered the lunch both as a friendly hangout, and as part of his responsibilities to empathize with colleagues and distribute the workload accordingly.

The information that workers collected about each other’s emotional states and personal troubles informed their decisions to offer support to colleagues, whether through individual initiative or by using company time and resources. The offered

support could be confined to the workplace, when a worker took on a tired colleague's tasks, assigned less work to them, or helped them manage a difficult workplace relationship. Offering support also facilitated a flow of material resources outside of the workplace, with workers babysitting a colleague's child, helping them search for their lost pet, finding them an oxygen concentrator during the pandemic, and caring for them during a mental health crisis. For instance, Alicia told me how colleagues' support helped her cope with an acute family crisis. They called her regularly to check on her, invited her over to hang out when she was feeling down, and encouraged her to take time off to deal with her troubles. She concluded that she did not know how she would have survived those difficult times without her colleagues' support. Support socialities between colleagues are in no way surprising given that workers at CD spent long hours working together, navigated common challenges and crises, and often developed friendships and intimate relationships. I examine in the following sections how managerial practices of bringing the 'heart and mind' to work, including rounds of feeling, coaching, and support, fostered and enclosed workplace socialities in the interest of capital.

B. Making Happy Productive Workers

Participating in a round of feelings required that workers contributed in a group-wide sociality where they confided to the group—sharing insights about the states of their 'hearts and minds'—and that they empathized with others' contributions. New workers who joined the company sometimes expressed finding the exercise to be difficult, but colleagues reassured them that the practice felt weird to most at the beginning, but everyone soon came to like it. When I asked workers in interviews about

how they perceived the round of feelings, many thought that it strengthened bonds within the group. For instance, Edmond described to me the importance of the round of feelings for the group,

‘It makes us feel connected, conscious of each other, and empathetic vis-à-vis each other, because we cannot talk to twenty people every week. Someone might say for example that they’re passing through a thing during this period, so I know this person’s emotional situation. I feel them, or they feel me, and this is important as if we are sensing our pulse, the group’s pulse.’

A worker bringing their heart to work thus allowed for others to ‘sense their pulse,’ know about their emotional state, and feel connected to them. For instance, in the meeting that I described above, Mariana expressed that sharing the same experiences with colleagues consoled her during times of sadness. Workers thus valued socialities emerging out of the connectedness of sharing emotional experiences, empathizing with colleagues, and resonating with their feelings in their own right.

Rounds of feelings aggregated individual workers’ feelings in a common space and allowed attendees to deduce ‘the group’s pulse’ which indicated how workers were doing as a group. For instance, during my time at CD, I often heard colleagues qualify the group’s general mood as tired, dissatisfied, or excited, without referring to any particular individual. The above vignette illustrates such an instance as Sohaib invited workers to reinterpret the questions in the round of feelings because previous workers’ updates had misled him in assessing the general mood. While workers highlighted the importance of workplace socialities in generating connectedness and empathy, they also often emphasized the usefulness of information about individuals’ emotional states and personal updates to decision-making in the workplace. The importance of that information stemmed from workers perceiving their productivity as dependent on their

emotional well-being. For instance, Eliane told me, 'We are not coming to work after having buried our soul somewhere else, and it's only our mind that got here. It's all interconnected. If I am emotionally comfortable, I can tear down mountains. If I'm not, I cannot even do proofreading.' Thus, given that the state of workers' 'hearts' had economic relevance, managers' scope of work extended to encompass workers' emotional states. They thus attempted to gear workers' emotions towards more 'positive' states, given that they cared about them, and also because they associated happier workers with more productivity.

Sohaib gave me an example illustrating the importance of 'sensing workers' pulse' and reacting accordingly. A short time after the meeting I described in the above vignette, and as workers repeatedly expressed their desire to leave the country, enablers announced in a team meeting that they were considering options for relocating workers internationally. An enabler who had discussed with a few employees in informal conversations their feelings about the decision reported in an enablers' meeting that workers were concerned about the decision and eager to know about the possibility of leaving. Enablers concluded that employees were feeling anxious, and Eliane suggested sending a reassuring email to ease the tension. Sohaib argued that the company was in a precarious situation and that sending such an email would give employees a false sense of security as the company could not guarantee to relocate everyone. Nonetheless, enablers agreed to have Edmond send the email. In the following round of feelings, most of my colleagues expressed that the email had made them feel hopeful and grateful towards the company for offering them the possibility for a life elsewhere. The email thus shifted the 'general mood' from sadness and despair to a more hopeful, and thus more productive, mood. In this case, enablers used the workplace's socialities and

information about workers' well-being and personal lives as economic categories to inform decision-making regarding the company's future and shift workers' emotional states to more productive ones.

Edmond argued that the company needed to increase the frequency of rounds of feelings, coaching sessions, and individual follow-up with the intensification of crises in the country and subsequent difficulties that workers had to deal with. During a time of uncertainty, managing the general mood at the company thus took on greater importance. William Mazzarella (2009) argues that any socially effective institution, that is not solely coercively enforced, needed to create affective resonances and appeals to its institutional demands. Ritualized moments of effervescence, such as the round of feelings in the above vignette, thus resonated affectively with the decisions managers took to mitigate the crises' risks, including the decision to relocate the company and intensify production to maintain a high level of financial liquidity. Institutionalized practices of sociality created the affective preconditions for bolstering the institutional effectiveness of crisis management decisions.

Even though workers at CD often tried to improve troubled colleagues' well-being by using their working time and directing some of their own or the company's resources to help, their interventions could not always match their colleagues' needs. Sohaib told me in his interview that he found the work of attending to workers' well-being anxiety-inducing. While he loved that kind of work because he preferred 'people tasks' to 'paper tasks' like writing reports, it made him feel anxious. He explained that being responsible for people's happiness was too much to handle for anyone, especially since workers' happiness often depended on aspects of their life beyond work. For instance, he knew that Mazen was not doing well because of the difficult situation in the

country and his parents' deteriorating health. He added, 'with everything going on in his personal life, whatever I do, I cannot be responsible for his happiness. In those instances, I get anxious.' When institutional workplace socialities invited workers to bring their emotions and personal lives into the workplace, it increased the scope of Sohaib's managerial responsibilities to include those aspects of their lives. Indeed, as the company structurally exceeded the sum of its workers, the interests of capital restricted the scope for helping colleagues. Supporting workers could only be done to the extent that investments in well-being led to increased productivity, at the risk of the company losing its ability to sustain itself. The anxiety Sohaib felt when managing workers' emotions stemmed from the tension between his desire to make workers happy—especially after they shared their troubles—and the structural conditions limiting his ability to help them far beyond that help's usefulness to the company. While workers tried to bridge the heart and mind, or the personal and professional aspects of their life, by bringing the former to work, a structurally conditioned profit bottom-line limited the possibility of fully integrating those aspects. Workers' emotional states thus exceeded what they could bring into the workplace, and what the company could offer as help.

The structural limitation related to operating from within capitalism also limited Eliane's ability to improve workers' well-being. She told me in her interview, two weeks after the Beirut explosion,

'I got to the point where I feel like a sandwich. If this company has to sustain itself, it needs to make money, if it needs to make money, projects need to be running, and who's going to run them? There are people who need to work. They need to dust the sadness off themselves and work.'

While Eliane thought that workers' productivity depended on them feeling well, she found out after the explosion, when workers felt devastated and demotivated, that their well-being depended on them taking time off, and thus reducing their productivity. Productivity and well-being in this case did not coincide. Eliane's statement suggests that she felt two contradictory pressures, one related to sustaining the company's profitability and the other connected to her work responsibility of maintaining workers' well-being. Thus, in some cases where accommodating emotional states and personal circumstances put the company's viability at risk, workers had to introduce a limit to integrating the 'heart and mind,' even if that resulted in keeping their hearts out of work and sacrificing their well-being to maintain their productivity.

CD's workers often recognized the structural limits of bringing 'their hearts' to work and receiving the support they needed. When I asked Yumna about her thoughts on the round of feelings, she said, laughing, that she sometimes thought it was absurd, 'Someone would say that they are feeling terrible, and the world is crumbling around them, and the meeting would go on with, ok interesting, yalla who's next?' The absurdity Yumna described mirrors Sohaib's anxiety, as both stemmed from asking someone how they felt without always being able to do anything about it. The institutionalized socialities, which relied on an ethos of empathy and support, required that workers volunteered to perform emotional work and provide resources to help those who needed it. Workers nonetheless could not always offer their support because they did not feel prepared or willing to do so. For instance, the above vignette shows that in a moment of hopelessness, Mariana could not do the emotional work of empathy and support that is required from her as a coach, and thus canceled the coaching session altogether.

In recognition of the potential absurdity of bringing the ‘heart’ to work, Maya told me that she did not want to involve her colleagues in her personal problems,

‘If I feel that I need to talk to someone, I talk to my boyfriend, my best friend, or my parents. I talk to someone who I feel cares. It doesn’t mean that the people in the office don’t care. I just haven’t built a relationship where I want to pour my heart out, and tell you my stories.’

She mentioned that Mariana sometimes ‘disarmed’ her and got her talking about her personal life during coaching sessions, but Maya had made the conscious decision to orient the coaching relationship towards her professional development rather than her personal problems. She added that while she loved CD, loved working with us, and found the work environment to be friendly, she still perceived it as her work circle. Maya only contributed to the institutionalized socialities with restraint, thus only allowing limited aspects of her personal life into the workplace. She preferred to pour her heart out outside of CD’s institutionalized socialities, as she did not see those socialities as implying care. Moreover, Ali told me in his interview that he did not like having colleagues check on him when he felt unwell, because he thought that their questions insinuated that his personal problems were affecting his work performance. He complained that colleagues allowed their personal problems to delay their work, and concluded ‘finish your work, and then go collapse if you want. Work is work!’, but then added that he felt bad when he thought this way about others’ struggles. Ali’s statement suggests that he did not buy into the call to bring his ‘heart’ to work, as he preferred to maintain a strict separation between his personal problems and his work. Maya and Ali thus tried to restrict their collegial interactions to professional purposes, therefore prioritizing economic obligations within workplace relationships and limiting the possibilities for long-term socialities.

Nonetheless, Eliane often tried to build, through institutionalized socialities communicative channels reproducing workplace socialities, and enclosing the resistances to bringing the heart to work. When workers delineated their personal and professional lives, Eliane acted in her capacity as the enabler responsible for workers' wellbeing. She told me in her interview that she did not always feel that her job was easy, as she particularly struggled with workers who did not open up about their feelings.

'If I am angry at my husband, I say, today I am angry at my husband, but there are people who cannot say it or consider saying it to be wrong. There are people who don't open up, like Sabine, Leila, and you. If you fought with your partner, maybe you don't allow yourself to tell us. This is your character and I should respect it. At the same time, I have reached a level of emotional intelligence where I feel that something is wrong, so I tell you that you can seek support, just for you to know that there is someone who can listen to you [...] even if you don't answer my message, you would know that someone could help you. You might not need me now, but maybe one day, you will.'

As she followed up with workers who 'did not open up,' Eliane attempted to counter the effects of their non-participation in workplace socialities. She thus deliberately produced emotional value for the company. Julia Elyachar (2010) argues that 'phatic labor' produces communicative channels that do not only transmit information but also semiotic meaning and economic value. When workers refused to contribute information about their emotional states and personal updates, Eliane still tried to build a communicative channel reaching them. Her work of sending messages and following-up thus constituted a form of phatic labor, as she perpetuated, through building those channels, the sociable atmosphere and the sense of mutual obligation underlying workplace socialities. The bonds she developed with workers through her labor extended the social infrastructure of empathy and support in the interest of

capitalist accumulation, despite workers' initial non-participation in the workplace's institutionalized socialities.

C. Exchanging Work as Gifts

Information about workers' emotional states and personal updates was essential to distributing labor. When workers could not offer the needed resources to help a colleague deal with their personal troubles, and thus restore their productivity, they used the information about their emotional state to accommodate for the resulting fluctuations in their capacity to work. Mazen thought that the round of feelings helped him know how his colleagues were approaching their week. He gave me an example illustrating the importance of expressing feelings to working within a team. While working with Leila on a common project, he grew increasingly impatient about her bad performance. However, after hearing her talk about her personal problems during the round of feelings, Mazen understood the extent of his colleague's personal struggles and consequently became more patient and forgiving when dealing with her. The round of feelings thus encouraged Leila to indirectly convey information about her problems to her teammates so that they would accommodate for her personal circumstances and her reduced productivity when working together. In this case, the round of feelings as a mechanism of institutionalized sociality facilitated an inter-collegial workplace exchange of personal information and empathy. The exchange had both social implications related to the two workers' relationship and economic implications concerning work requirements Mazen imposed on his teammate.

Edmond further illustrated in his interview the importance of socialities of empathy and support for distributing the workload. He argued that regular rounds of

feelings helped him sense when someone was feeling tired and when ‘turbulences’ lay ahead, like a worker getting married, having a child, or dealing with a mental health crisis. He gave the example of his current week where he had worked late every night because Mariana was getting married, Sohaib had been overworked for weeks and needed to slow down, and many workers were spending a considerable amount of their day volunteering to help those affected by the Beirut explosion. Had workers not shared information about these ‘turbulences’, Edmond would not have taken the extra load, and project teams would not have delivered products to clients on time. In such instances, this information helped workers estimate changes in a worker’s future productivity, and redistribute work responsibilities to make sure that no worker got overloaded, and that clients received their products with as little disruption as possible. When Edmond described events related to workers’ families and health as workplace ‘turbulences,’ he presented the perspective of capital. According to that perspective, the ‘normal’ order is for workers to maintain consistent production, and elements related to their social reproduction constituted mere disruptions rather than being essential aspects of their lives.

My interview with Ali suggests that the perspective that connections beyond the workplace were ‘turbulences’ had permeated workplace practices and systems. For instance, Ali argued

‘Working at CD fits more the life of independent people, those who do not depend on others and don’t have others who depend on them. People who, like me, are more dependent have some problems with CD’s fluidity. For example, I have other things to take care of, my personal life, my family, and my family business.’

He then gave examples of workplace expectations not accounting for workers’ commitments beyond the workplace. He thought that the plan to relocate the company

did not account for those who had old parents or children, and that during lockdowns, workers were expected to maintain the same productivity from within their homes or rent an apartment alone. Ali's statement suggests that he felt the pressure of conforming to a normative workplace subjectivity where he severed his connections beyond the workplace or treated them as mere externalities, or 'turbulences' rather than key aspects of his life.

Information about individuals' emotional states was also used beyond interpersonal exchanges between workers; this information contributed to managing fluctuations in productivity at the level of the whole company. Workers' participation in institutionalized workplace socialities played a crucial role in supporting enablers to maintain a steady and predictable production process within a flexible mode of organizing labor. Indeed, the practice of labor distribution and workplace support, which I describe in the second chapter of this thesis, did not rely only on information about workers' individual tasks and the associated number of planned days in a certain week, but also on information about how workers were feeling and what was going on in their personal lives. For instance, the structure of team meetings, starting with a round of feelings, followed by a labor distribution discussion, allowed workers to use the information about each others' emotional states and personal updates to reallocate tasks. Sohaib explained the importance of rounds of feelings, individual follow-up, and support in managing the workload distribution within the company.

'I think if you have the right tools and the right culture in place, you can easily balance between people's productivity and their wellbeing. If I have the right tools to anticipate that a difficult month is coming up, I can balance everyone's workloads. The right tools as in a weekly team meeting, or a coaching session or whatever to know that Haya is burnt now, or she's passing through circumstances in which she cannot produce. You need data to have an early warning and an early response. This needs to be coupled with, the right culture, an unsaid agreement, a

norm that we take work off each other, and if anyone is overwhelmed, they tell us. For example, Jenny is willing to give up on going out this week to do some of Haya's work and help her out. At the same time, the culture rejects Haya abusing others' help, making it a trend. In this case, the culture comes and says-, it's funny how I think of the culture as a mighty [superhero], no?'

Sohaib's statement shows that he considered productivity and well-being to be in conflict with one another. He nonetheless presented institutionalized socialities as a way of avoiding being 'sandwiched' by the contradictory pressures, like Eliane was. Workers often knew when a colleague was overwhelmed at work, when they were feeling sad or anxious, or even when their house flooded over the weekend. During the labor distribution conversation, they offered support to those who needed it by taking on some of their tasks. The 'culture'—Sohaib's mighty superhero—mandated expressing feelings, helping others, and refraining from abusing help in a way that supported the labor distribution to resolve the tension between productivity and well-being. The culture-as-superhero thus perpetuated the obligation to offer, receive, and reciprocate workplace support in a way that maintained a predictable and consistent level of productivity. Institutionalized socialities constituted the grounds for workplace exchanges, as they facilitated the flow of information about workers' feelings, and perpetuated forms of sociality built on mutual cooperation and reciprocal exchanges. CD's workplace socialities thus played a crucial role in sustaining the company's profitability within a context of flexible capitalism—where work requirements changed fast based on market conditions and the company needed to adapt quickly to those changes.

These findings bolster Kjaerulff's (2015) argument that gift-like socialities sustain the intense commodification of labor within flexible capitalism. Nonetheless,

these socialities did not just proliferate at CD in response to precarity within flexible contexts, they were also deliberately developed, fostered, and exploited through institutionalized mechanisms.

A worker's workload often varied based on their personal initiative to support colleagues so they could spend more time with their newborn child, go on vacation, or write their thesis. Thus, an employee taking on an extra workload without receiving any compensation for it perceived their work as a gift to a friend, rather than as unpaid labor. Workers thus often justified being overworked based on events in colleagues' personal lives. Perceiving the workload as assigned to individual workers and available for exchange allowed for flexibility in labor relations, whereby tasks were dynamically distributed and redistributed to account for changes in context. This mode of assigning work centered the bonds of care and friendship between colleagues, while glossing over the exploitative economic exchange of labor for wages and obfuscating the company as a structure. Workers thus often saw work as an act of care towards colleagues, as I develop in the second chapter of this thesis, and thus intensified their own exploitation in the name of supporting others. Moral and social commitments towards colleagues thus played a crucial role in regulating the employment relationship and organizing production. The flexible mode of distributing labor and the associated institutionalized social practices thus shifted the location of labor conflicts from the relationship between employer and worker, to relationships between colleagues (Narotkzy, 2015).

Seeing work as an act of care meant that workers interpreted a colleague's underperformance as not caring about them. Indeed, the flexible mode of labor distribution entailed that a worker who did not deliver their assigned work increased everyone else's workloads to make up for the loss. Workers thus often frowned upon

and socially sanctioned a colleague who had an unjustified low level of productivity. Eliane explained to me that the main risk of CD's flexible mode of distributing labor—where no one kept count of workers' working time and their time off—was that the system might be unfair to particular individuals who worked more than others. Workers thus tried to infer others' level of contribution to the workplace in order to maintain fairness. Indeed, Leila argued in a group session about the company's culture that the round of feelings often affected workers' perceptions of each other's productivity and work contribution. She explained that workers came to perceive those who expressed feeling tired and harried as hard working. In order to deal with the commensuration of information about their emotional states and personal updates into assessments of their work performance, some workers refrained from sharing information in rounds of feelings. For instance, colleagues often told me about a day they spent in the mountains or at the beach while asking me not to share that information with others. Dina also told me in her interview that she had sensed that the information she shared about her personal life during rounds of feelings had led to others perceiving her as someone who was constantly wasting time. To counter that perception, she kept her interventions 'shallow' and avoided disclosing details about her personal life.

Workers sometimes refrained from participating in the workplace's institutionalized socialities when they perceived colleagues to not care about them. For instance, Mazen told me, in a conversation I had with him about the round of feelings, that he often only shared mundane information during the exercise because of his inability to express his anger about work. He gave me the example of a time when he was angry because a teammate had failed to deliver her section of a report they were writing together. He thus had to work during the weekend to compensate for his

colleague's 'underperformance.' When asked about his feelings in the team meeting, he felt that he could not express that anger and thus decided to talk about his weekend activities instead, and concluded, 'ask me about my feelings when you are not making me angry about work, when everyone is doing their job.'

Mazen felt angry towards his colleague for failing to meet his expectations at work, and towards the company for lacking mechanisms enforcing her commitment within the economic exchange of labor for wages. He reciprocated this perceived lack of care by refusing to participate in the workplace's socialities. In his frustration, he rejected the premises of bringing the heart to work, distinguished the economic exchange from the emotional and social one, and asserted the primacy of work over feelings. I could intimately relate to Mazen's anger given that around the time I conducted the interview, a colleague working with me on a project took time off to go on a vacation abroad, while having me interrupt my own time-off to deliver a training for our common project. I avoided every round of feelings and social interaction for the coming weeks because I found no room to express my anger. I even found it difficult to interact with other colleagues who did not work on the project. In this case, the ambiguity of social relationships within the workplace transferred conflicts about work responsibilities into social tensions.

While the above examples of workers avoiding to participate in workplace socialities show the limits of institutional social practices, these practices often disseminated in ways that can enclose workers' resistances and reap their economic value for the company. For instance, Mariana, my coach, and Eliane noticed after the above-described incident my frustration and social distance from colleagues. They initiated conversations with me to encourage me to give feedback to my teammate.

Eliane argued that telling them about my frustrations would help them better account for others' time in the future, and Mariana suggested that doing so would prevent me from feeling resentment towards them. My colleagues thus enclosed my resistance, through the practices of coaching and individual follow-up. They also reasserted my obligation to contribute to CD's socialities of care, and to transform my feelings of anger and frustration into better working mechanisms for the company.

The flexibility of labor relations thus contributed to entangling workers' reciprocal social commitments towards colleagues with their work obligations towards their employer. The resulting socialities ambiguously fell at the intersection of two value realms with workers having to navigate and negotiate different moral obligations in every interaction (Narotkzy, 2015). Mazen illustrated, in his interview, the ambiguity of operating within the ambivalent value realm. He told me that he complained to his coach Alaa that he had a lot of work, felt constantly tired, and had no time to spend with his family and friends. Alaa responded that everyone had to work more given the company's precarious financial situation. Mazen reported feeling that Alaa had failed to empathize with him as a coach in that situation, and that he had responded instead as his employer, a partner in the company. Having felt betrayed, Mazen decided to retreat from the social practices within the workplace. While he had evaluated the coaching relationship as a site for a friendly sociality and had offered information about his emotions and personal life based on that premise, his coach's response perpetuated the morality of a commodity exchange of labor for wages. Mazen's feelings exemplify the emotional stress and anxiety that social actors operating within an ambiguous regime of value experience, especially when assessing appropriate behavior in situations

combining conflicting requirements of care responsibilities and economic interests (Narotkzy, 2015).

Resisting the workplace's institutionalized social practices often also took the form of shaping the ambivalent value realm by differentiating ties with colleagues and configuring relationships based on tactical needs. For instance, when my colleagues shared information about their weekend plans while asking me to avoid relaying it to others, they considered that exchange to be one between friends and clearly marked it as such. Differentiating moral obligations in a social relationship did not only rely on explicit markers, as workers often used spatial, temporal, and circumstantial cues to sort the type of ongoing obligation and the orientation of a certain exchange towards short-term professional purposes or long-term friendly socialities. Additionally, workers resisted the enclosure of workplace socialities by crafting social spaces that remained inaccessible to institutionalized social practices, such as side conversations on the balcony, after-work drinks, and WhatsApp groups. Workers maintained in these spaces intimate social bonds, and often complained about the workplace, colleagues, and clients in ways that remained unavailable for managers to use in improving the company's managerial practices and financial performance. Moreover, workers sometimes used these spaces to organize and advance workers' interests, such as helping each other negotiate higher pay, or adjusting workplace systems to increase workers' control over the labor processes and their own working time. In these cases, labor organizing depended on socialities fostered through institutionalized practices, and repurposed to advance workers' interests.

D. Maintaining Workplace Hierarchies

‘I wish partners were as vulnerable with me as I have been with them. I wish they told me when they felt tired or frustrated. I feel that I have done that for the past six years, and that has contributed to me remaining at the lower end of relationship dynamics. Because even if partners say to themselves that being vulnerable is a strength, I don’t think they are often vulnerable with us. The few times where Mariana was totally vulnerable with me have brought us closer, helped me better understand her, and motivated me to carry with her the company’s burden. Unfortunately [founding partners] are often only vulnerable to each other.’

Jenny suggested, in her interview, that the practices of inviting workers to be ‘vulnerable’ and share their feelings perpetuated workplace hierarchies. She considered the workplace’s relationships of power imbalance as stemming from unreciprocated bonds of empathy and support. Partners expected Jenny to assume more responsibilities in the workplace after becoming a partner herself. At the same time, she did not think that they trusted her with such responsibilities because the history of unreciprocated ‘vulnerability’ made them perceive her as a less capable subordinate.

Other workers had also noticed disparities in workers’ exercises of empathizing with and supporting each other. For instance, most employees could list at length a myriad of ways in which partners had helped them during their times of crisis, but they could not think of many instances in which they had reciprocated. Conversely, Mariana told me that she often rushed to help those who needed it but rarely sought the same kind of support from colleagues. She avoided showing that she felt unwell and needed help within the workplace, as she thought that workers loved her and would worry too much about her. She also argued that some might even worry about the influence of her feeling unwell on the company’s operations given the importance of her role in the company. The impossibility for employees to reciprocate partners’ gifts of empathy and

support created a one-way flow of generalized reciprocity reproducing the workplace's hierarchies and partners' dominant position within them (Sahlins, 1965).

Institutionalized social practices thus reproduced the workplace's social structures, and enabled the operation of power at intimate levels.

E. Conclusion

Workers at CD adopted a human-centered approach to managing the workplace, whereby they brought both their 'hearts and minds' to work. They thus tried to integrate two realms that they saw as distinct and intimately interconnected: the realm of economic obligations and that of social and moral commitments. Workers thus developed a set of institutionalized practices aiming at inciting individuals to share information about their emotional states and personal updates, empathize with each other, and offer support to those who needed it. These institutionalized practices enclosed workplace socialities as they geared workers towards happier and more productive emotional states, generated affective resonances supporting managerial decisions, sustained flexible modes of organizing labor, and consolidated workplace hierarchies and managerial power. Inspired by a particular school of management, workers deliberately produced long-term socialities and connections in the interest of capital.

Workers often resisted, both consciously and unconsciously, the workplace's enclosure of their social bonds through non-participation in workplace practices, and even repurposing workplace socialities to serve workers' interests. Nonetheless, workplace socialities often extended to enclose workers' resistances and reorient them towards increasing productivity and serving capital's interest.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

‘At the end of a call with Leila where we discussed progress on our common project, we started talking about our plans for the evening. She was telling me that she was going out with her friends when I heard her partner’s voice from the background saying, ‘I bet you’re staying in tonight to work.’ Leila explained that they had canceled going to a play a couple of days ago because she had too much work to do, and her partner was still annoyed about that. She added that she had been going through a period of *aaj’a* since the previous month. Her partner would cook them dinner or they would make plans to go out, but then she would repeatedly delay ending her workday, as new work tasks kept popping up. She concluded, ‘Even if I want to do something different after work, I don’t have time. I feel that at CD, it’s almost expected that you do not have a life outside of work.’ Given that I was concluding my thesis writing at that point, I exclaimed with the excitement of an anthropologist whose interlocutor had just confirmed their findings, ‘This is exactly what I’m writing about in my thesis!’ Leila then asked, intrigued, ‘Ok, what should we do then? How do we stop working? I’ve been working for too long now, and I can’t go on. Make us an action plan!’

I do not have an action plan. However, I do have some things to say to each of the three audiences I am addressing.

First, I documented in this thesis a local form of flexible capitalism at work in Lebanon during a time of crises, in the hope of advancing anthropological knowledge. I argued that work became a total social fact at CD, as it created and transformed a social configuration including social, affective, ethical, political, and economic dimensions. When Leila felt that her employment at CD did not leave her room to have a life outside of work, she hinted at the totalitarian aspect of work, and the ways in which her job enclosed her time.

I explored in this thesis different dimensions of work at CD starting with the ways in which the workplace was organized. In following this line of inquiry, I attended

to the ethical dimensions of organizational culture while focusing on the company's commitment to a moral value of partnership. I showed how the capitalist market's ethical values clashed with working systems enacting CD's partnership value. I then documented the meritocracy emerging out of workers' attempts to mediate between the two conflicting moral orders. I showed how this meritocracy coexisted with another traditional hierarchy based on the ownership of the means of production, and described the ambiguity workers navigated when operating at the intersection of different hierarchical orderings. I finally argued that founding partners used aristocratic logics to limit the possibility of them sharing their power within the workplace, and thus hindered the enactment of the partnership value and countered the flexibility in managing the workplace.

In the second chapter, I tried to answer a simple question, why do workers overwork? In doing so, I attended to the sense of importance workers ascribed to their work, and to the concrete means by which they made that importance visible to others. I showed that workers at CD valued their work as a means of securing their livelihood and developing their professional skills and networks within a precarious labor market. They also valued work as affective and ethical engagements towards their colleagues, the workplace as a collective, and the world. These different means of valuing work coincided within the workplace and bolstered the sense of importance that workers ascribed to their work, thus inciting them to overwork.

In the third chapter, I documented CD's institutionalized practices of sociality encouraging workers to bring their hearts to work, by sharing feelings and personal updates, empathizing with others, and offering them support. I showed that workers tried to integrate, through these institutionalized socialities, the realms of economic

obligations and that of social and moral commitments, which they saw as distinct but interconnected. I argued that the workplace's institutionalized socialities oriented workers towards increased productivity, supported mechanisms for flexible labor distribution, and reproduced power relations within the workplace.

Throughout I have addressed my findings to anthropologists towards reiterating Hirokazu Miyazaki's (2006) call to adopt the hopeful predispositions of capitalism's active participants and develop critiques of capitalism that do not preclude the possibility for action plans. In this summation, I want to address explicitly my colleagues. That work becomes a total social fact at CD has significant implications for the company's workers; it shows that work often encompasses all aspects of our lives. It transforms our relationship with society and even shapes our sense of self-worth. This finding behooves rethinking the space that we allow for ourselves to live a life that is not dominated by work. It entails questioning our usual ways of thinking about CD, including reducing the company to the sum of its workers, accepting emerging hierarchies as 'realistic,' and normalizing overwork by presenting it as recurring cycles. These conversations could also result in changing and disentangling current working systems for sharing information, making decisions within the company, holding each other accountable, distributing the workload, measuring our productivity, and bounding our working time.

Lastly, I address my findings to leftist activists. Many around the world are, like Leila, asking themselves, 'how do we end work?' Indeed, the number of subscribers to an 'anti-work' subreddit has increased from 13,000 in 2019 to more than 1.5 million in 2022. Commentators argue that the pandemic has spurred an 'anti-work' movement. Regardless of the scale and coherence of the so-called 'movement' to rethink, and even

end, work, conversations about the topic are flourishing, and leftist activists are well-positioned to push their anti-capitalist political agendas. I thus address in this thesis labor organizers, to show the radical heterogeneity of work. Indeed, this thesis documents a different kind of work than the one that seems to dominate activists' thinking on contemporary work, which is highly influenced by David Graeber's book *Bullshit Jobs*. Understanding the diversity of work is crucial to effective action. Work as a total social fact implies that workers often find themselves with little to no sources of fulfillment and sociability outside of work. Such a relationship to work intensifies exploitation while obfuscating structural elements related to the relationship of employment. Raising class consciousness, unionizing, talking about salaries, and resisting exploitation through everyday practices are necessary. Necessary, too, is another path towards ending work—or at least ending work as a total social fact—to counter the totalitarian aspect of work relations by carving out spaces for workers to express themselves, have positive effects on the world, develop caring bonds, and build economic and social safety nets outside of work.

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