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Multinationals

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Publication Date

2004-02-05

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High-Skilled Workers in Mobile Telecommunications Multinationals

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**First Draft of Work in Progress.
Comments Welcome.**

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The Global Corpo-nation?:

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I interviewed Chandra¹ at the cafeteria of the futuristic headquarters of the telecommunications multinational where she has been working for a little over two years. The place is something of a showcase for the very latest in Nordic interiors and offers a chance to enjoy the silhouette of downtown Helsinki at a distance while one eats, thanks to the largely see-through architecture of the building. As explained in the brochure handed to visitors at the reception desk when they check in, much thinking and creativity has gone into the effort to capture the “feeling” of “flows” --of “people, ideas and energy”-- in the construction of this space. As we walked past other tables on our way to the counter where Chandra could use her company tokens to buy us some (Latin American, fair-trade) coffee and a bagel or a croissant, I overheard bits of several conversations, mostly in English, in foreign--but identifiably not Finnish-- accents. We began discussing the time when Chandra’s husband, a colleague at Onnikka Co.², first received the offer to work at the company’s headquarters, when the young couple still lived in New Delhi. I asked Chandra if she could for a moment try and forget everything they had learned about their then-future employer afterwards and tell me what they knew about it at the time. She chuckled and said, “Well, we *of course* knew of it, everybody in the business knew of it...I mean, I’d never heard of *Finland* before, that there was such a country, but Onnikka, sure. I thought maybe it was Japanese or something.”³

There are many things that the little episode above may be “about”, but possibly the most immediate reading of it for many would be that this encounter between Chandra, Onnikka Co., Finland and even myself is an instance of globalization. By now, globalization is indeed firmly entrenched in the popular repertoire of ways of thinking about the contemporary world, around the world, and it may well be one of the most tired academic topics of discussion of the past decade. All that is solid is claimed to be, once again, melting into the air as imageries of effervescent flows, omnipresent networks, incessant connectivity and unrestrained mobility(ies) become increasingly popular in sociological treatises on the essence of the present (Giddens 1990, Bauman 1998, Urry 2001, Castells). In the “global age” (Albrow 1997), little is contained and everything moves, and not sure or even that concerned about where to go, goes global.

The sweeping statements of the “liquid turn” in the social sciences are problematic not because they can be readily cast away as wrong, but because they typically do not come with the kind of sustained empirical investigation that would allow for an assessment of whether or not--or with what qualifications and to what limits-- they may be right.⁴ As

¹ Names of interviewees have been changed to protect their privacy.

² Names of all three companies included in the study have been changed due to legal constraints over discussing information gathered first-hand from interviews with their employees.

³ That despite the convention of using a pseudonym most readers will probably recognize the company here underscores Chandra’s point.

⁴ This is all the more strange given that there is actually a fast-growing body of empirical work that can be used to support the claims.

such, they often remain deductive, provocative assertions, easy to dismiss (or even ridicule) with illustrations of exceptions to the big generalizations—anecdotal pastiche is the evidence of choice in this sort of exchange. It is in this sense that while globalization might be a tired topic, it is far from being exhausted. Favell is right in asking, “when are sociologists of globalization going to show how all this talk of mobility, hybridity, mediascapes, virtual reality, and so on can be brought back and some systematic evidence delivered for it?”(Favell 2001:4)

Since much of what had come to be assumed as solid during the short 20th century was commonly preceded, often implicitly, with the adjective “national”, many recent attempts to understand what globalization might mean and entail have placed a rightful emphasis on entities and processes that may be/becoming post- and/or trans-national. The obvious, however stylized, “Before” snapshot of the societal makeover we are undergoing shows a world divided into nation-states. The debate on contemporary globalization is at its heart one about the role they have hitherto played as “containers” and primary shapers of social relations.(Taylor 1994) The intensification of the role nation-states played in “encaging” economic, political, ideological and military relations so as to render the boundaries of social relations congruent with the boundaries of the territorial state had been central to the rise of the modern order.(Mann 1986, 1993) An earlier wave of globalization can in fact be said to have been about the diffusion of the territorial state model, whereby the world was divided into “multiple, contiguous state territories.”(Brenner 1999:47) The question is whether a more recent wave of globalization is taking this system apart by tearing down its internal boundaries. To the degree that this is true, nation-states cease to be meaningful units of social analyses. Although, as Michael Mann points out, “there has never been a singular systemic network of social interaction which might constitute, as it were, a ‘total society’,” and there, indeed, may never have been a “nation-state society”(Mann 1998:185) sociological analysis in the last century typically took “society” to be synonymous with societies living within the boundaries of nation-states or, even more simply, as nations.

Recent scholarship on contemporary forms of citizenship, identity, consumption, culture, migration, social movements and economic relations show us that the sociological convention of mapping “societies” directly onto neatly-defined nation-state boundaries is getting much of the serious rethinking that it needs. Normatively divergent accounts of globalization that range from the celebratory to the critical in tone largely share this basic insight. What Neil Brenner refers to as a “global territorialist” approach is predicated on the claim that “the global scale has become increasingly important as an organizing locus of social relations.”(Brenner 1999:53-54.) Defining globalization “as processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society, a global society,”(Albrow 1990:9) “intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa,”(Giddens 1990:64) or the construction of “a single society and culture occupying the planet”(Waters 1995:3) are all illustrative of the perspective that fundamentally sees it as a process of the “spatial widening of social relations.”(Pries 2001:13)

These are burdensome claims with respect to proof, largely because they are indiscriminate about what kind of social relations and what scope of widening they refer to. More problematically, they do not provide us the “After” snapshot from the real world in terms of what globalization then might mean in terms of the real-life experiences of individual human beings. If the nation-state was the primary engager and shaper of a variety of social relations, and if such capacities of nation-states are now eroding, do social relations now pour out into the void? Since social relations are by definition between people, how and where are their lives now given shape, direction and choice, if these are coming to be defined less exclusively through national belonging?

None of the aforementioned definitions of globalization argue for the “end of the social,” (though some others do that, too) and they would therefore only benefit from being complemented by empirical studies on how social relations and the various flows associated with them are “stably structured” (Favell 2001:3) by, and in my opinion, also in, a variety of (global) institutions. In fact, it is mostly various institutions and their activities, rather than disembodied processes, which challenge the engagement capacities of nation-states. They do so *because* they, too, shape social relations, after their own imperatives. This does not mean that they entirely surpass or circumvent nation-states in informing social relations, but, rather, that they may provide other sites, modes and rules of engagement at the same time. Through studying the instances of overlap, in the concrete cases of individual lives engaged by both institutional spheres, we can become better equipped to define globalization as a process.

This paper is a preliminary attempt of this kind. I explore here some themes that have emerged from my research on the life and work experiences of individuals who, obviously, belong to and live in (the same or different) nation-states but who also, through employment, partake in one particular type of global institution, the multinational corporation. Chandra and her husband are now living in Helsinki due to and inside a set of social relations and hence flows that are contained not only by Finland (or India), but also, and perhaps more definitively, by Onnikka. Although, as I will discuss next, there is much written on multinational corporations with respect to globalization, we have so far little understanding of the “rules of engagement” that operate inside them.

Multinational Corporations and Their High-Skilled Workers:

Multinational corporations (henceforth MNCs)⁵ are certainly among the global institutions that are widely discussed with reference to the nature of their relationship to nation-states. Much of the discussion over them has concentrated on precisely the issue of whether they have gained prominence at the expense of nation-states (Harvey 1989, Ohmae 1994, Dicken 1998, Mishra 1999, Friedman 2000) or whether nation-states continue to retain the significant portion of their capacities to define their own courses of action. (Pierson 1996, Heikkila et.al.1999, Castles 2001) For many scholars, MNCs, instead of challenging nation-states, are among the things that are primarily engaged by

⁵ There is a long and interesting debate in management and business studies about the conceptual differences between multinational and transnational corporations, but in this paper I use the terms interchangeably.

them. (Esping-Andersen 1990, Evans 1995, Weiss and Hobson 1995, Weiss 1998, among others) Studies on foreign direct investment and capital transfer around the globe show MNCs eroding the powers of nation-states, but typically in foreign countries, not their homes. (Gereffi and Wyman 1990, Hoogvelt 1997, Dicken 1998, Chang 1998, Crotty et.al.1998, Kentor 1998, DeSoysa and Oneal 1999) For those who argue that the primary role of MNCs is the consolidation of the hierarchy between countries (Chase-Dunn 1991, Wallerstein 1995), they would in fact be instrumental in strengthening the powers of nation-states, not eroding them. Studies that point out that MNCs promote the creation of regions of intensified economic activity, rather than homogenizing the globe as a single corporate playing ground do not posit the same relationship with nation-states per se, but they use this insight to qualify the *limits* of globalization claims.(Hirst and Thompson 1996, Mair 1997, Held et.al.1999)

Most discussions of MNCs remain at the macro/aggregate level and treat them exclusively as actors, not sites of human activity. In the meantime, while there has been considerable and justifiable interest in the experiences and plight of low-skilled or unskilled workers who (typically indirectly) work for MNCs around the world, the experiences of high-skilled workers have been central to popular, rather than academic, treatments of globalization.⁶ Conceivably, a new breed of “global souls” (Iyer 2000) are both the consumers of products and services offered by MNCs and are employed by them themselves. In their claimed mobility across global hubs and their converging lifestyles, employment experiences, and life chances, they embody the best that the “borderless world” (Ohmae 1990) promises to be. Much anecdotal and impressionistic evidence in popular media highlights the lives of these “cosmopolitans” who shuttle between meetings in equally sleek branch offices of their companies around the globe. Sections devoted to human resource management issues on corporate newsletters and/or websites are typically filled with statements on how the corporation pursues “best talent” regardless of where s/he might be found. Some of the most geographically dispersed multinationals are in fact themselves “headhunters” in the global corporate job market jungle, since finding the right people is itself lucrative business when “only the very best will do.” From the critics’ perspective, this highly-select group of professionals with plump compensation packages are the privileged few whose atypical experiences in the global economy misleadingly overshadow the far larger and pressing reality of an increasingly tenuous workforce. As such, they are the embodiment precisely of the worst impulses of globalization, of the widening gap between the lucky few and the uncertain many. From a celebratory view, by contrast, these workers are the success stories of the free flow of talent and skill finally made possible by a genuine fluidity that puts them to work where they are most needed. Because both views are typically argued on political grounds and supported by impressionistic evidence, they do not place individual workers within the context of what I here have claimed structures their relations.

Consequently, between the expansive scholarship on the macro-structural outcomes of MNC activity on the one hand, and the popular images of what life and work inside them is supposed to resemble on the other, as potential “containers” of relations themselves,

⁶ There is of course the growing literature on high-skilled migration, especially within the context of global cities, which I will be the first to admit I should incorporate into this review.

MNCs remain a black box. Where attention has turned to the processual aspects of the life within them, the emphasis has mainly been on the negotiation of cultural differences at the workplace. (Garsten 1994, O Riain 2001) The negotiation of cultural differences, “diversity management” is an increasingly popular topic in management scholarship and practice, often entailing, however, rather essentialist notions of culture and cultural identity based on the national. The most thorough treatments of the employment experience in MNCs to date have been those that have examined the issue from the point of view of the efficient use of human resources. (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1989, O’Hara-Devereux and Johansen 1994, Lipnack and Stamps 2000) Although this perspective provides us with some of the prescriptive standards for the ways in which MNCs are to contain social relations themselves, they do not tell us about actual practices and the way they are experienced by workers.

In order to comprehend how MNCs structure and contain social relations, we need to conceive of them not merely as institutional actors--whether they be in battle with nation-states, or cooperating with and/or embedded in them--but also, simultaneously as *sites* of human activity. Among the variety of global institutions that I believe need empirical investigation I pick the MNC because of its central role in the globalization debate with respect to the erosion of nation-states’ containment capacities. Among the variety of groups of individuals whose experiences can show us how different institutional spheres of engagement are *superimposed* under globalization I pick high-skilled workers in MNCs because, they are among the likeliest candidates to have the footloose lives that have gained a “freedom of extraterritoriality.” (Bauman 1998:28) If any group of workers should be able to be truly mobile, having the entire globe as the potential playing ground, having broken out of the boundaries of the nation-states, they should be the high-skilled symbolic analysts (Reich 1992) whose skills are transferable across the world. Their experiences can therefore inform us about the degrees to which we can qualify and curb the “big” statements of globalization.

Research Study:

In trying to identify the “rules of engagement” that are at work inside the MNCs over high-skilled workers, I draw upon research on high-skilled employees at the three leading MNCs of the global mobile telecommunications sector. Onnikka Co., with headquarters in Finland is one of them, Lindberg Co. with headquarters in Sweden and Corpola Co. with headquarters in the United States are the other two.⁷ As I will explain in more detail below, the mobile telecommunications sector is an appropriate choice for investigating the issues I am interested in because geographically speaking, its field of operations is as global as multinational corporate activity has gotten; it increasingly employs exclusively high-skilled workers; and the work in the sector involves the application mostly of technical skills and expertise--those that should be the most transferable around the world. In other words, I wanted to focus on the most “global” group of employees in the most “global” sector possible. Furthermore, the sector, unlike most others and the field of MNCs in general, is not dominated by American firms: the headquarter countries of Finland, Sweden and the United States here provide me with a nice contrast of the ways capitalist economies can be organized at the nation-state level.

⁷ These, too, are pseudonyms.

A crucial reservation is in order here: My research is currently in progress; in other words, it is unfinished. In this paper I only present some preliminary themes that have emerged from the research I have completed so far, the more detailed implications of which I will explore further in later work. These themes come out of the 68 interviews I have conducted to date with high-skilled workers at Onnika, Lindberg and Corpola in the headquarter countries of Finland and Sweden, as well as branch offices of the three corporations in Istanbul, Turkey. The inclusion of a periphery site was important in trying to avoid generalizing from the experiences of workers at headquarters. The research will be completed following several additional interviews in Sweden and Finland and the final set of interviews in the United States.⁸

The length of the interviews ranged from an hour in a few cases to over four hours in several. For the most part, they lasted between two to three hours. Interview locations were somewhat variable, about 55 carried out at the workplace, typically in offices or meeting rooms, and the rest either at my office or in the private home of the interviewee. I took detailed notes during all the interviews, and taped all but seven interviews.⁹ The interviews were mostly in English, except for those with Turkish workers in the three countries.¹⁰

An initial set of about a dozen interviews were conducted in Turkey and Sweden in the summer of 2001, while trying to assess the suitability of the sector for my research, and focused more immediately on the practices at the current workplace. The other 55 interviews were conducted between January 2003 and the present and in these I have followed a life-course format. I preferred this format so as to be able to place the employment experience within the context of the employees' backgrounds and overall career trajectories. It also allowed for them to elaborate on specific instances within the employment experience, rather than talk in terms of generalizations. Because the life histories very often involved experiences of working in other offices of the MNCs in a wide variety of other country sites, I was also able to find out about the practices in places where I could not personally be present.

In the set of 55 life-history interviews, I also gave participants a self-administered survey that includes questions about their demographic and socio-economic characteristics, as well as their patterns of consumption, leisure habits, and various social practices, that were then matched to their interviews. So far, about 35 surveys have been returned.

The Mobile Telecommunications Sector:

In 1995 there were about 50 million mobile phone subscribers in the world. In 2005, that number is expected to be over a billion and a half. Mobile phone penetration rates have

⁸ I carry out around 20 interviews with workers at the MNCs' headquarter countries and an additional 5-6 interviews with workers at the other two MNCs in each country. In Turkey I interviewed roughly an equal number of interviews at the branch offices of the three MNCs in a total of 20 interviews.

⁹ Because the transcription process is so slow, I am unable to provide verbatim quotes from the interviews here.

¹⁰ In Sweden and Finland I interviewed both local and foreign workers, the latter group including several Turkish engineers.

increased exponentially, especially in Western Europe, the “heartland” of mobile phone usage, where the overall penetration rate hovers around 70%. In Finland and Sweden, the rate is more close to 90%, and in the United States, long the anomaly of low mobile-phone usage among the OECD countries, the trend appears to have finally been broken, with penetration rates going over 50%. Importantly, expansion of mobile phone usage has not been an exclusively affluent-country affair. Although penetration rates are expectedly much lower in less developed countries, mobile telecommunications technology is rapidly being adopted by them as well, often at faster rates than the development of fixed-line telephony infrastructure and services. In Turkey, for example, mobile phone subscribers went from several hundred thousand in 1995 to over 16 million by the end of 2001, gaining an almost equal footing as the number of fixed-lines in the country. Especially those countries with large populations like China and India find themselves on the list of target areas of the leading mobile telecommunications multinationals as potentially lucrative markets of the future. With such rapid current and potential expansion, the mobile telecommunications market stands to become increasingly more global.¹¹ Mobile telecommunications MNCs conceive of the entire world as their potential markets and playing grounds. At least in this sense, the sector mimics the “global territorialist” route to globalization.

Four developments have informed the rapid growth and expansion of the global mobile telecommunications business: liberalization of the telecommunications sector in the form of privatization of previously state-owned and run businesses or the rights for teleservice; the standardization of technology –the GSM—which allows for high levels of technology transfer, leading to high levels of innovation and decreasing end-user costs and rapidly expanding the market; “bearer networks migrating together,” a proliferation of technologies that allow for data communication services much more varied than fixed-line telephony; and the increased importance of mobility to the point where the global consumer demand for mobile telecommunications services promises to replace demand for fixed-line telecommunications tools in the long run.

Taken together, these changes have transformed the technological and commercial structure of the telecommunications sector, increased the already-significant business aspect of telecommunications, and provided fertile ground for the rapid growth of a number of MNCs to acquire an increasingly global presence. They also have significant potential consequences for the composition of the high-skilled workforce employed in the sector. The first two tendencies (of liberalization of national telecommunications and the standardization of technology through standards’ openness) both should *expand* the job market for professionals outside of the boundaries of their countries of origin. The other two tendencies underscore the still growing significance of technological innovation, and hence, the centrality of high-caliber knowledge workers, for the mobile business. Because new technology does not necessarily flow from, but, rather, increasingly helps *shape* market demand, high-skilled workers are the backbone of the global mobile telecommunications business.

¹¹ The “digital divide” over mobile telecommunications around the world is smaller than that over other forms of connectivity, notably the internet.

There are four major tasks involved in the provision of mobile telecommunications services to end-users: the establishment, maintenance and upgrading of the infrastructure; the production of the end-user terminals, the cellular handsets; the operation of the networks and the provision of teleservices; and the regulation of each of these three activities and the general context in which they interplay. It is in performing the first two of these tasks that MNCs have emerged as the dominant actors. While there are increasing tendencies in both the regulation of telecommunications and in service provision, the former remains predominantly within the domain of state authorities and service providers tend to be local, at least at the country level.¹²

Although it is not the only mode of mobile telecommunications, the largest proportion of it is in the form of mobile telephony, especially in terms of geographical dispersion around the world. Hence, the largest global businesses in the entire sector are the equipment makers, and it is the top three MNCs involved in this activity that I include in my study.

The Rules of Engagement:

The interviews in three different countries and in three different MNCs provide a plethora of differences in the experiences of high-skilled workers, across a number of axes. “Methodological nationalism” (Wimmer 200x), so immediate to the comparative thinking of social scientists and laymen alike, tempted me, too, to think firstly in terms of these differences as those between the employment experiences of MNC workers *in* Finland, Sweden and Turkey. Although this framework also defined the logic of comparison adopted by a number of interviewees in their narratives as well, still more popular among them was what I may refer to as a “methodological company-ism”, after the long-standing business and management scholarship tradition of distinguishing the particularities of different companies through case-studies, taking the company as the unit of analysis. “Corpoleans”, as they are referred to by the central administration, often talked about what is unique about their company, as did workers at the other MNCs when they talked about “the Onnika way” or “Lindström Standards.”

Because difference, rather than similarity, is a much more commonly used narrative device in defining the “self,” in this case any particular MNC, in any particular country, it is easy to lose sight of the *commonalities* in the ways MNCs structure the social relations and practices inside them. Such commonalities include material, practical/processual and symbolic ones. I group them here under the title of “templates,” although the actual contents of vary across the three companies, each company uses similar templates in structuring the activities of workers inside them.

a-) Material Templates:

i-) The most significant way in which the MNCs differ from nation-states as a container of relationships and have in common with one another materially is that they are physically present in the geographical space of more than one nation-state at the same

¹² There is a growing tendency for network operators to provide services across national-boundaries especially in Europe, but this tendency is far from having become definitive of the sector as a whole.

time. In the case of the MNCs in the study, they each have offices in over 100 countries. Lindström and Corpola have been in the telecommunications business for a long time, the former for over a hundred years. That they sell their products in overseas markets, is therefore not new. Although they have had production plants in low labor-cost areas of the world in the past, these were also in a limited number of locations. Before the liberalization of the telecommunications business and especially the rise of mobile telephony, the presence of the MNCs away from their home countries took the form mostly of dealing with national PTTs for the sales, maintenance and upgrade of fixed lines. This did not necessitate the setting up of permanent offices in too many locations around the world. The proliferation of branch offices in the sector came about in the 1990s, and often took place in several cities in one country if the markets were big or expected to become big enough. The concrete locations in space where the MNCs are “present” constitute the basic infrastructure inside which the movement of a variety of factors is to take place. The various physical locations are obviously not in the same relation to the various activities and resources of the MNC, but they largely define the boundaries of the container.¹³

ii-) The second way in which life inside the MNCs is materially streamlined is through the *products*. Of course, these products often undergo significant amounts of local customization, depending on previous technology used in any given country-site, and not all markets purchase the same products. Furthermore, the MNCs produce too many different kinds of products for every high-skilled employee to be fully familiar with all of them. Finally, workers in different locales within the MNC have different relations to the same products: some innovate them ten years before they become—if ever—commercially available, while others only sell them. Nevertheless, the product series are largely the same, and the tasks of high-skilled workers intersect through them.

iii-) The MNCs in the study are “wired” with several forms of infrastructure for the transfer of information between their various locations around the world.

All workers I interviewed were provided with one of the latest models of the mobile phone that their companies make, typically machines able to handle the transmission of multi-media messages, including e-mails.¹⁴ The phones work according to both European and American standards, not a standard feature on most mobile handsets commercially available. The individual workers are hence within reach of colleagues during their frequent travels and not-so-frequent times off.

Computers, too, were made available to interviewees, almost all of them had their own laptops provided by the employer. One of the infrastructural tools all MNCs used through the computers was the intranet: an exclusive form of internet accessible only to their own employees. Although I was never able to see what this interface looked like, interviews

¹³ There are, of course, more than 100 countries in the world, and in several interviews there were instances where MNC workers went to locations with no permanent branch offices. I do not mean, therefore, that the physical locales have a one-to-one correspondence to the limits of MNC activity.

¹⁴ For the workers in Sweden and Finland these were the *only* phones: there were no fixed-line phones in the offices and many workers did not have a fixed-line at home, either.

reveal that the platform is widely used in announcing and finding out about opportunities in the internal labor market of the MNC. Ads for vacancies are posted here either exclusively or prior to being made public in outside media channels. The intranet also provides an avenue for cooperative problem-solving—employees can post a certain technical difficulty they are having and receive answers from colleagues from other locations of the MNC.

Certain technologies are specifically designed to allow for meetings between people working on the same projects but are located in different nodes of the MNC: teleconferencing is the oldest of them, while net-meeting was cited by many interviewees as the most widely-used and well-liked. In net-meeting, the parties in different locations are able to hear the person talking elsewhere and follow what he shows on a computer screen. There is also video-conferencing, where the parties can both hear and see each other. Many interviewees commented on this tool not being necessary to their work, but for occasions such as the quarterly performance announcements or other major statements from the headquarters, video-conferencing is used widely, workers typically given time and opportunity to follow such events wherever they are located.

The contents of what is transmitted through such material means and the exact boundaries the MNCs have materially may vary. However, the relations within all three MNCs in the study impinge upon these three material templates. The MNCs also have templates for practices inside them, which shape and channel the activities of individuals:

b-) Templates for Practices:

i-) The specific arrangement differ depending on the company, but all three MNCs, rely on the same *organizational structures, job designations, and principles of hierarchy* across their own terrains; ie, the physical locales that they are present in. The job specifications and titles are the standardized across the MNC, as well as the relative position of each position with respect to others. *Reporting* practices follow these organizational structures. These, in their specifics, varied between the three MNCs, but whatever reporting practices any one has adapted, that is used throughout its “territory.”

ii-) Since the MNCs work largely with the same, technical products, they all *tend* to recruit largely employees with engineering backgrounds. Even interviewees in sales and marketing functions tended to have technical degrees, though this is of course not exhaustive. A second group of employees were people with business or economics degrees, often in support function roles. This selection from the onset streamlines the MNCs’ workforces.

The recruitment process itself, too, is structured and administered in similar, if not exactly the same, ways around the many nodes of the MNC. Applicants were given the

same kind of personality/skills assessment tests¹⁵ and went through the same series of interviews with people in corresponding positions at their particular MNC location. Interviewees who work in the Human Resource Management departments of the same MNCs in different locations did specify that they use the “same tools” as the rest of the MNC. The recruitment process is not the same for all three MNCs; one of them was repeatedly reported as having administered a particularly complex set of tests, another, to have asked potential employees to perform presentations etc. Although similar across the sector, the recruitment practices are similar especially within each of the MNCs.

iii-) After beginning employment, the vast majority of the MNC employees I interviewed, with only a few exceptions, talked about having received further *training* in the form of *module courses*. Employees attend courses either in a training center that is officially a part of the MNC, or that are provided by a third party. Often, training was the reason for first travel for employees after beginning their jobs—most of these training sessions were attended by other MNC workers from other country sites, often from the same region, but occasionally from around the world. While some of the modules are highly general, and some sector-specific, some of them are exclusive to the specific MNC.

Training is then documented in all three MNCs in the personal files of individual employees and the companies keep track of training received by each employee in centralized data banks in a form of company-level census record. Along with certification for particular kinds of training valid in the larger sector, the MNCs have their *own* certification schemes which they then use to allocate credentials corresponding to qualification to take up certain ranks within the MNC. While the particular forms of record-keeping and the kinds of credentials awarded vary between the three MNCs, they all engage in the same general practice.

iv-) Work is widely arranged around *projects* and *teams* in all three MNCs. These projects can primarily concern any one of the many nodes included in the spatial boundaries of the MNC activity, and the *team* can be constituted of members dispersed across different nodes. It was not clear to me from the interviews what proportion of projects actually involved such geographically-dispersed teams, but almost all interviews mention being involve in such projects regularly.¹⁶ Only one interviewee talked about having carried out an entire project entirely through a virtual team, but geographically-dispersed teams use a mixture of information-communication technologies and less frequent face-to-face get-togethers to carry out the projects. On certain occasions, many projects and teams may be at one and the same node of MNC territory--this is typically the case, for example, during contract bidding. In such instances, the team is often a temporary constellation, rather than constituted completely by MNC workers employed at the particular node.

¹⁵ It is not possible to tell, based on the interviews, if they are the exact same tests, but based on what the interviewees could recall about the kinds of questions they were asked to answer on them, they appear to have been at least very similar.

¹⁶ Workers are often involved in more than one project at any given time.

Theoretically speaking, teams can be put together using the central data bases where qualifications of employees are recorded. According to the interviews, however, project managers instead put together teams through personal contacts, either inviting people they have worked with before, or with people who are recommended to them by people they have worked with before. The changing composition of immediate colleagues around the premise of particular projects is the way all MNCs in the study typically structure the work of their employees.

v-) Like they do for the recruitment, training, certification processes, MNCs have templates for *performance assessment* that they apply globally. Employees across the MNC do their performance assessment at the same time and in the same way. The categories of assessment are the same inside the MNC, as well as the ranking system associated with it.¹⁷

vi-) Finally, an important way in which life inside the MNCs is structured is the language(s) spoken here: There is first the MNC-specific vocabularies, including the technical jargon that is specific to the technology produced at each MNC and, the terminology pertaining to the organizational frameworks and processes in each of them. Secondly, and more crucially, the official language of all three MNCs, as is the case with most MNCs today, is English: English is the “global vernacular” of business. This is a recent development, as most Lindström and several Onnika employees I interviewed actually did recall the time when official correspondence was still carried out in Swedish or Finnish. All documentation associated with the practices outlined above is in English, which makes their global application possible, especially since MNC employees are basically screened for this skill during recruitment.

c-) Templates for Symbolic Representations:

i-) “Corporate culture” has been the subject of a massive volume of business and management literature in the past decade or so¹⁸, and it is taken seriously by the MNCs themselves. All three MNCs have a variety of formulations on their company culture that take both discursive and artifactual forms. On the one hand, there are the *myths* and *legends* of each MNC—critical moments in the turn of their fortunes, past or present CEOs who led the MNC through them, celebration of technological breakthroughs in the company’s history and the like. These are put in concrete form in the shape of books, pamphlets, web-sites etc. and passed on to the various MNC offices around the world.

There are also *mottos*, *slogans*, *lists of principles*, *pledges of excellence* etc., only some of which come out of the larger, more public effort of marketing their consumer products that are disseminated around the MNC globally. These travel across the nodes of the MNC embodied in posters, placards, stickers, t-shirts, bags, stationary etc.¹⁹ It is not

¹⁷ I do not take up here how these templates are applied in actual MNC sites and how such application may differ in practice. This would be the next step in studying the empirical material at hand.

¹⁹ I unfortunately failed to inquire how regulated the display of such artifacts is by specifications from the headquarters, especially in the branch offices.

possible to tell how much actual employees are “taken in” by these in the interpretation of their work experiences in the corporation. However, at least in the representation of their employer to me, an outsider, in the interview context, interviewees talked often (and without prompting) about various aspects of their company in terms of its “culture,” typically referring to one or more official formulations.

ii-) Although MNCs do not have their own completely novel spatial representations of the geographic world per se, they do have their own *mental maps* that correspond to the spatial boundaries defined by the locations of their offices around the world. The capital of France for a Corpola employee in Finland, for example, is not Paris, but Toulouse. For Lindström workers, going to the US means going to Dallas, while for Onnikka workers it means Atlanta. These mental maps represent the nodes and connections that exist because of the physical locations of MNC activity and hence around which actual flows indeed take shape. The MNCs also have different maps of the world because they divide the world into market units, not countries. Since their priorities are not geo-political but economic, they have designated “regions” that do not correspond to more popular ways of designating continents, for example. Since each MNCs’ market share in different regions may be different, their designations of regions do, too. In general, however, the MNCs’ maps consist of Europe, Middle East, Asia and the Americas.

iii-) All three MNCs have *newspapers* and *magazines* to be distributed to their workers around the globe. I have kept these separate from my earlier discussion of the infrastructure for flow of information because, the newspapers and magazines serve more of a dissemination, rather than communication function in this context.²⁰ The self-representation of the companies in these cluster around the celebration of technological and/or commercial achievements on the one hand, and the showcasing of the “global workforce”, on the other. These publications have articles and news about recent business deals at various offices, stories of individual workers, and entries on how the MNCs’ technology is being used around the world, through which, assumedly, they attempt to do what others have done with newspapers before, that is, imagine a community.

The Global Corpo-nation?:

I have outlined above the ways in which MNCs, at least in one particular sector, attempt, through a variety of means, to contain and structure the material, practical and symbolic aspects of life inside them for high-skilled workers globally. I do not claim that any attempted containment is complete or fully realized. But the templates I identify come from accounts by actual workers talking about their lived experiences within the MNC and not from the prescriptive blue-prints the MNCs have for organizing and executing their operations. At least some of the tools MNCs use to structure and streamline the activities of their workers resemble those used in imagining, and making, other kinds of communities, among them nations. Do we have a corpo-nation in the making then?

The obvious answer is no. The MNC is primarily an economic entity that operates on the principle of maximizing profits, employment here is a purely individual contract that

²⁰ Although this can be said in general for other kinds of newspapers and magazines as well.

does not accommodate the family or household²¹, and the contract is a tentative one at both ends: The worker can leave and go to another job, or, as in the more frequently-lived case, s/he may be let go by the corporation. The social worlds, life chances, reservoirs of well-being, and choices of action for individual workers are, therefore, at best only partially engaged by the institutional sphere of MNC employment.

The high-skilled workers in MNCs may not be a corpo-nation, but are they “global”? If we are looking at a group of individuals with similar educational backgrounds²², who work with and through the same or similar material artifacts, abiding by same or similar rules, carrying out the same or similar tasks in same procedural ways, and doing so, simultaneously, in a hundred different locations around the world, is this an instance of “globalization”?

It is, but not in the way the global territorialist view envisioned it. There is no necessary spatial widening of social relations at hand here. The majority of the templates I have detailed in discussing the ways in which MNCs “do globalization” have to do with *standardization*, of practices, processes, representations etc., across space, possibly across the globe.²³ It is the flow and diffusion of standardized practices and knowledge that is imperative for MNCs, not of people. The MNCs move people primarily so that they take the standardized practices along, until the practices in the destination node also become standardized. This is the basic insight of know-how and technology transfer, for example: experts will come, teach the necessary skills, and once the locals have acquired those skills, the experts can return home.

As such, from the point of view of the MNC pursuing its purpose of profit-maximization, there is no necessity for the high-skilled workers to become trans-national, in the sense of traveling between or existing in two or more national territories. The important thing is that they become more *homogenous* as a workforce, with more standardized skills, able to work in standardized ways, so as to render the activities of the MNCs’ and their coordination around the globe feasible. In fact, if the workforce was homogenized sufficiently, and if this could be done relying solely on information-communication technologies, there would be no need to move actual people around. Standardization and homogenization within the MNC makes the flow of people less *necessary*.

Yet they also make the movement of individual workers more *possible*. The global standardization, however imperfect, makes entry into a particular MNC locale easier compared to entry into other, local workplaces in a foreign country, even if the high-skilled worker does not come from the same corporation in the first place. MNC locales, in comparison with other places of employment for high-skilled workers, constitute, in a way, enclaves of de-nationalized, “cosmopolitan” economies.²⁴

²¹ There are, actually, many married couples working for the same MNCs.

²² Of course, “similar educational backgrounds,” such as an engineering degree, can involve, materially, practically and symbolically, quite different things in different specific contexts. The various combinations of MNC employment and national memberships is something I will explore in later versions of this work.

²³ I am aware that I need to incorporate John Meyer’s work into this discussion.

²⁴ That is in relative, not absolute, terms.

Individual workers' experiences and assessments of any particular MNC node will be defined by the *superimposition* of the constraints and opportunities derived from their employment against the backdrop of the constraints and opportunities of the countries they live in, have left behind, or are going to. Chandra's plans to move to the US seemed perfectly reasonable.

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