CHAPTER 4

Technologies of Control and the Invisible Transformation of the Labour Market from Welfare State Principles to Welfare Capitalism

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Abstract: This chapter is based on an evaluation of the Norwegian oil company Northoil's performance management system, People@Northoil (P@N), by which workers evaluate their co-workers, producing numerical assessments of every employee's performance, behaviour, and adherence to company values. We argue that a specific techno-logic is written into P@N as a digital infrastructure, transforming the labour market from welfare state principles to welfare capitalist reward and punishment. Through its techno-logic of governance at a time of financial abundance, P@N is a herald of welfare capitalism. It is only one of many such systems, which both build and build *on* the selfsame techno-logics present everywhere in New Public Management and neo-liberalisation. Together this leads to anti-democratisation by expelling human judgement and discretion. As such, P@N is one of many structures of capitalist working life, which both harbours its own individualisation and technological control, and simultaneously furthers them as global techno-logics. P@N is one of the many technological reward mechanisms, whereby welfare capitalism is increasingly replacing the welfare state as the provider of security. We see an individual sense of security tied to capital, gradually replacing the need for a communal, that is, a social sense of security.

Keywords: welfare capitalism, techno-logic, governance, digitalisation, control, work life

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This chapter is based on an evaluation of the Norwegian oil company Northoil's[1] performance management system, People@Northoil (P@N), by which workers evaluate their co-workers, producing numerical assessments of every employee's performance, behaviour, and adherence to company values. Said numerical assessments form the basis for employee salary settlement and company streamlining. We argue that a specific techno-logic is written into P@N as a digital infrastructure, transforming the labour market from welfare state principles to welfare capitalist reward and punishment, or in a word, control.

The chapter is theoretically grounded in Michael Burawoy's analysis of how workers willingly submit to the conditions of capitalism (1979), and discusses disciplining and specific forms of control written into digital infrastructures. We rely primarily on Tian Sørhaug's analysis of the fetishisation of relations (2017); Byung-Chul Han's reflections on the role of transparency today (2015); Fredy Perlman's understanding of technological capitalism as daily activity (2017); Martin Heidegger's articulation of the metaphysics of our age as 'the age of the world picture' controlled by modern technics (1977); Tord Larsen's perspectives of self-objectification (2009); the reassessment of power by Fyhn, Røyrvik and Almklov (2021); Tim Ingold's perspective on humanity's position in technological society (2000); and finally our own work relating to technological articulations (Røyrvik & Berntsen, 2022).

In 2013, NTNU Social Research (NTNU SR) conducted a survey of P@N, and its possible impact on Northoil's 'culture of openness' (*åpenhetskultur*). Northoil requested this survey in response to criticisms in the aftermath of a collision incident—namely that offshore workers did not report safety issues for fear of reprisals. Union representatives therefore wanted Northoil to evaluate whether P@N was part of this so-called culture problem. During the survey project, internal political tensions emerged both through P@N itself, and through its evaluation – especially between management and worker unions, as P@N both actualises and transforms power relations and positions within the Nordic welfare model, and the tripartite agreement more specifically. The data presented in this chapter stem from this evaluation, as well as a survey, and interviews of workers, middle and top managers, both onshore and offshore. Experiences from the evaluation, and related meetings and discussions, also form important data for the analysis and argumentation of the chapter, enabling deeper

1 'Northoil' is an anonym for a large Norwegian oil company.

contextualisation. Though these data are nearly ten years old at this point, they are still very much relevant. In fact, the passing of time has, in some ways, strengthened our discussion – as did it Burawoy's, because we are now able to point out other trends, and in turn relate P@N to these. P@N is but one of many such systems, and much of our discussion focusses on the underlying techno-logic of these systems, and why they emerge in the first place.

After presenting the data, we discuss how P@N can be understood as a fetishising technic. Based on Karl Marx's (2004) description of commodity fetishism, by which economic value appears as inherent to the commodities themselves, Tian Sørhaug (2017) describes the fetishisation of relationships, whereby relationships appear as inherent to the individual. P@N is a technic that produces precisely this fetishisation of relationships. In public discourse, systems of evaluation that end up with a set of numbers, are often talked about as a form of *grades*, as in school grades. The debate quickly turns to whether it is right to quantify workers (including managers), that is, to measure and express their performance as grades. This is an interesting discussion in itself, particularly if we were to question what a grade actually is, and what it is meant to express (rather than measure). But here we focus on how the numerical assessments are made, and what conditions the numbers express, and, through this, how P@N acts as a *fetishising machine*, turning relational aspects into objective attributes – that is, the attributes of objects.

Next, the chapter discusses why trade unions in particular oppose P@N. The study shows that employee attitudes towards P@N depend on their background, and especially, what potential consequences the system could have for them. Young onshore managers were the most positive, whilst experienced offshore non-managers were the most sceptical. Views on the salary determining component of P@N were divisive. P@N yields different consequences depending on several factors outside of the worker's control, such as their position on the salary scale, the type of work they were engaged in, and the approach to P@N taken by their manager(s). This factor is essential for workers' assessment of P@N. Interestingly, the employees positive to P@N emphasised individual consequences, such as increased salary, whereas those who were negative emphasised systemic consequences, such as lowered trust between workers, reduced loyalty to the company, and the potential for abusing the system and creating conflict. This same individual-system dichotomy

is also found in how Northoil argues in favour of the system, and trade unions against it.

The lines of conflict actualised through P@N have in fact already been established through the introduction of individual salary settlement. P@N further exacerbates this conflict by increasing individualisation and lessening collective bargaining, by objectively fixing performance, behaviour, and values through rigorous numerical assessment,[2] thereby ensuring a 'formally correct' settlement, as opposed to a shared agreement founded on human judgement. This shifts power from unions to upper management, and furthermore, transforms power from human-centred assessment to human-peripheral principles of techno-logics. Taken together, this shift and transformation forms the basis for distributing rewards through welfare capitalism.

Finally, we show how P@N is a symptom – and at the same time also one of the driving forces – of global megatrends such as neo-liberalisation, anti-democratisation, and individualisation of labour. In Norway, these logics challenge the so-called Nordic model, and introduce welfare capitalism through technological and digital governance at a time of financial abundance.

Background

On the oil platform Gullfaks C, on 19 May 2010, what is called an 'unwanted incident' (*uønsket hendelse*) occurred in the North Sea, involving a vessel and a platform, both of which were Northoil's responsibility. As always in the event of an unwanted incident – that is, an accident or near accident – there was an investigation in order to clarify responsibility, and the causes of the incident. This particular incident was the collision of the vessel and the platform. The investigation, carried out by a Norwegian institute for interdisciplinary research on climate change, was thorough, going far beyond merely establishing the incident's causal conditions, and problematised the company's work culture, characterising it as lacking transparency. The institute found that some workers were afraid to speak out about safety-critical conditions, for fear of consequences, conflicts, and

2 This is an expression of a larger tendency, discussed and described by, amongst others, Blim (2012), Sørhaug (2016), Supiot (2017). Politics and governance are increasingly done through numbers and calculation, which in turn both entails a very specific form of control and reinforces existing power structures and inequalities.

causing a ruckus. The investigation received a lot of attention both within the company and in the media, giving various groups in the company the opportunity to direct attention to aspects of the company of which they disapproved, in order to track down the cause of what eventually became known as the 'lack of transparency culture'. It is no coincidence that a security investigation pinpoints the lack of *transparency* as a problem – as Byung-Chul Han (2015, p. vii) shows, today's society is the transparency society, and '[w]herever information is very easy to obtain … the social system switches from trust to control.' P@N was one of the factors that found its way into the spotlight, and NTNU SR[3] were tasked to investigate whether the system affected the company's culture of openness.[4]

P@N is a system, or – depending on whom you ask – a process, with multiple elements and purposes. Northoil calls it a 'performance management system', describing it as 'the company's process for managing performance, development, and placement of our employees' (Fenstad et al., 2013, our translation). The process is often represented as a wheel of time, consisting of four phases that together span a year. The first phase is a preparation process that consists in structuring and registering dialogue between manager and employee, and agreeing – in accordance with the system – on performance and evaluation targets. Next is the evaluation of the employee, expressed through numbers, which people clearly regard as the key phase. Afterwards, the results of evaluation form the basis for follow-up and manager-employee dialogue. Lastly, data from the former three phases is collected to form the basis for the next turn of the wheel.

In addition to being a process, P@N is a digital system, and a system for digital coordination, governance, and control over the process. This entails – amongst other things – a digital structuring of employee tasks, wherein employees must log on, and log their performance goals (together with their manager), evaluate others – and log this evaluation. They may also read their own evaluations in this digital system. Several employees relate to us their discomfort with having a poor evaluation logged and available – in principle permanently – in this digital storage. Another aspect

3 Røyrvik, who was working there at the time, was the project leader for this task. We would like to thank Jørn Fenstad and Anniken Solem, who also worked on the study.

4 Although the 'culture of openness' is not the topic of this chapter, the idea and the concept of openness appear throughout this text in different ways. As a topic of research and investigation, it is a desired state of organisational culture to include honest criticism and discussion. 'Openness' as a dimension of the organisation's management technology is technically specified and operationalised as a distinct measurement unit of human behavior.

of this system is, as we will discuss in more detail later, the surveillance of logging and being logged by others. Digital systems like these are examples of what we elsewhere (Fyhn et al., 2021; Røyrvik & Berntsen, 2022) refer to as drop-down menu power, because you are at the mercy of the design of the menu system – you are not allowed, nor technically able, to do anything counter to the way that the system intends, but are compelled to follow the rigid interface. Furthermore, you must perform the evaluations – if you do not, this is logged as well. The system is inscribed with a concrete form of technological discipline and power, which is inescapable by design.

When NTNU SR were assigned the evaluation of P@N, it became clear early on that there were really two clients: the company Northoil, and the trade unions. The evaluations of the Gullfaks C accident, which shone a spotlight on the company's culture of openness in the first place, gave unions the chance to actualise their issues with P@N, and maybe even get rid of it – a prospect the company, for its part, had no interest in doing.

Trade unions were negatively disposed to P@N for several reasons. For instance, there were stories of the system being abused. Stories, such as workers receiving terrible evaluations – and the associated, equally poor, salary development – from managers with whom they had conflicts. There were examples of people who had suffered severe psychological breakdowns from the violation of receiving bad grades for their personality, people regretting their rushed grading of others, and other stories of power infringement and abuse. The company thinks that this type of abuse is unavoidable, and that P@N merely made it more visible and transparent. But the trade unions believe that the power bestowed – particularly upon management – by P@N is qualitatively different from issues of power infringement and abuse prior to the implementation of P@N.

Even Stronger Values, Performance, Behaviour

Everyone in the company is evaluated in three ways through P@N. These are:

1. Even Stronger Values (ESV)
2. Performance
3. Behaviour

The ESV evaluation is a so-called 365° evaluation, in which a middle manager would be evaluated by those above, equal to, and below them in the

employee hierarchy, whilst someone from upper management would only be evaluated by those below, and an employee at the bottom of the hierarchy would be evaluated by their peers and managers. The evaluation examines whether the employees live up to company values – is the employee 'open', 'critical', and 'creative'? The name, Even Stronger Values, is meant to suggest that the values will be complied with 'even more strongly'.

Performance is evaluated by the employee's manager. The manager and employee will have defined objectives for the employee to achieve for the year of evaluation. The manager then evaluates how successful the employee has been in achieving their goals, which then becomes the worker's performance for the year.

Behaviour is yet another assessment of how well a worker complies with company values, where the manager alone assigns a numerical value to the degree of compliance.

The company refers to these quantifications as 'numerical evaluation', but employees all refer to them as their 'grades'. The evaluations in P@N are all on a numerical scale from 1 to 6. It is important to note here that in the Norwegian school system, primary through upper secondary schools use numerical grades on a 1–6 scale, which is replaced at university by an A-F scale. When workers refer to their evaluations as 'grades', this highlights the fact that the evaluations may be perceived as somehow infantilising.

The issues and discussions that accompany these evaluations differ slightly. The ESV evaluation prompts reflections on the social aspect of being evaluated by one's immediate colleagues, as well as on how this evaluation is expressed as a mark. The performance and behaviour evaluations prompt reflections on both the grading itself, but also its direct consequence, since the worker's salary settlement is based on their grade average.

Evaluating P@N

The mandate for NTNU SR was to investigate whether – and if so, in what way – P@N influences the culture of openness in Northoil. Though we will touch on some of the results from this evaluation, our aim here is not to answer Northoil's mandate,[5] but rather to expose and discuss the logic of P@N.

5 This was however the aim of Fenstad et al. (2013).

A precise answer to the mandate would be: 'It depends on the context.' This conclusion is about as interesting as it is surprising. However, if the culture of openness is supposed to be the solution to the lack of transparency culture, then clearly there is a rather curious form of openness at play here. Han (2015, p. vii) writes that '[t]he society of transparency is not a society of trust, but a society of control'. In keeping with this, the lack of transparency is actually a lack of control. 'Openness' then, in turn, describes how willingly an employee subordinates themselves to transparency. Han writes of 'the dialectic of freedom', that '[f]reedom turns out to be a form of control' (p. 49). In Northoil's case this dialectic seems entirely appropriate, substituting openness for freedom.

The results of the evaluation help us understand the more fundamental tendencies that we want to point out in this chapter, as well as the role – and differences, in terms of legitimacy – of the different types of data gathered by the evaluation. For the sake of simplicity, we can divide the evaluation into a quantitative and qualitative part. Thus, it is interesting to note which participants emphasise quantitative data, and which ones emphasise qualitative data – and how this in turn relates to an individual or systemic focus. But before we examine all of that, we will review the actual data.

The Survey Study

NTNU SR carried out a questionnaire survey, and Northoil helped to ensure it was communicated efficiently, leading to a large scope, as well as a high response rate. In addition to generating useful statistics, the survey received an unusually high number of written comments from respondents, who wanted to contextualise their answers. The survey provided information on how P@N is used as a tool, and what respondents find useful about it. Additionally, it yielded information on how P@N affects workers on the unit level, and how they experience the feedback they receive through P@N.

Most employees are reasonably satisfied with the system. The most frequently cited complaint was the system's link to salary settlement. Interestingly, this problem was raised from two, diametrically opposed angles. That is, some workers found the link itself problematic, while others did not think the link was strong enough, and that grades should impact salaries more directly.[6]

6 The report contains an in-depth presentation of this data. Here we only present what is relevant to our present inquiry.

Though the evaluation is clearly considered the most important phase, when survey respondents were asked what they consider P@N's most important use, most responses emphasise the setting of goals and clarification of expectations. Personal learning and development are in second place, and effects on salary determination and promotions are of tertiary importance.[7] The distribution of responses to questions regarding P@N's use as a tool shows how the vast majority agree that P@N is a good system for managing goals in their unit, as well as for personal learning and development. This may be explained by respondents interpreting the wording 'most important use' to mean that use which yielded the best, or most positive, effect. In any event, most people disagree that P@N's most important function and suitability is linked to evaluation or reward.

Summarising the descriptive statistics, the numbers are not particularly drastic, except for the assessment of the link between P@N and salary. Answers are fairly evenly distributed, with consistently more positive than negative answers. When combined with the company's work environment and satisfaction analyses, we see that the answers correlate with the respondents' backgrounds. Namely, onshore managers with little experience are the most positive, whilst more experienced non-managers, especially those working offshore, are less positive.

The Interview Study

The survey shows that rather than P@N producing one culture or another, respondents evaluate P@N differently according to their own situation. Interviews corroborate this finding. Three different descriptions of P@N were offered, based on the type of consequences P@N could potentially have for the respondent. P@N is:

1. A professional system that works positively for the company's culture of openness
2. A problematic system with negative consequences for individuals and the company's culture of openness
3. Something that 'just has to be done', which does not really have any particular impact on anything

7 It is important to note that the survey's order of the answer options, the result of negotiations between us and Northoil, is identical to this order of priority. The order of answers may have influenced the result.

Position 1: A Professional System That Works Positively for the Culture of Openness

Those who consider P@N to be a professional system, point out that it can be helpful for career building, or for getting another position. It can also contribute to a high salary increase. Some interviewees focus on how they can register where they would prefer to work, and what they want to work with. The system is thus perceived as helpful, since information is both stored and processed in the employee's best interest. Others say that they assessed their own efforts somewhat modestly, and were then positively surprised by their salary development, when the manager's numerical evaluation had exceeded their own, bringing up the average mark. Interviewees point out that the immediate managers are important, and that the system helps to highlight their qualities, and that P@N makes a positive difference when the managers need to develop their employees and/or themselves. Common to these assessments is the focus on individual benefits from the system, and on P@N as a tool for managers to assess their employees.

This group describes their given and received ESV assessments as something positive. ESV lets one adjust one's self-image to workable feedback. Additionally, when assessing others, it forces one to focus on different characteristics of one's subordinates. Some interviewees had reservations concerning who evaluates whom. Several interviewees were unsure as to whether the appropriate people – that is, the ones who know them best – are the ones assessing them.

Managers, irrespective of whether remote or not, argue that the system can also ensure transparency, in that they can be more honest than they would be face-to-face – even if some feedback can be difficult to handle for the subordinate. Some managers put a positive spin on this and say that employees who score low (1 or 2) should be followed up more closely than other subordinates, in order to turn a difficult situation into a positive one.

Though members of this group, like everyone else, refer to their marks as 'grades', they do not object to being graded. They do, however, point out that an increase in salary is not perceived as the logical extension of one's grades, and they argue that there should be an even closer – more automated – link between grades and salary.

One interviewee refers to giving and receiving evaluation through P@N as 'getting the truth out, and having one's self-esteem adjusted'. Many

interviewees emphasise this aspect of being made aware of one's development, goals, and plans. They are confident that the manager evaluations are high quality, and that managers and subordinates use P@N honestly and not for manipulation. Feedback through P@N is considered precise and will, among other things, lead to an improved culture of openness. In summary, this group considers P@N to contribute positively to the company and the 'culture of openness'.

Position 2: A Process with Possibly Negative Consequences for the Culture of Openness

Those who assess P@N as a negative process, perceive this process as primarily related to the determination of salary – even though they have heard that P@N is supposed to be used for something more than this – and problematise both how the system should work, and how individual managers use it for discipline and punishment in conflict situations. Union representatives explain how they received better grades when they stopped being critical, or halted their union work.

ESV and behaviour grades are perceived as especially problematic for transparency. Both to give and receive grades on attitudes seem problematic to many. If the managers try to 'game' the grading (for example by giving everyone a 4), they are pressured into 'using the scale' to achieve a normal distribution, regardless of the department size. The same interviewees argue that it is evident that those receiving a lower salary development will not be openly critical the following year.

Also linked to transparency is the concern that issues that could previously be raised with a manager onsite, must now go through the 'system' instead. This is also linked to the now frequent change of managers, as the system requires internal flexibility, enabling the transfer of personnel – upwards or downwards, through reward or punishment. Some tell us that they have a new manager each year, and interviewees say that having a new manager every year, perhaps someone who has never even been in the same location as themselves, makes it difficult to achieve a good relationship with their manager. This is seen as generally having a negative impact on transparency, especially considering the effects on salary development. Manager continuity is thus suggested to be a prerequisite for P@N to function at all. Yet the opposite – increased mobility – is a prerequisite written into the system.

The group also points out that P@N can be abused by managers, and there were several stories about this. Furthermore, there is a fear of reprisals, which makes the system unable to contribute effectively to transparency. Many stories from this group describe problems related to the evaluation and grading of behaviour. They say that P@N can be used as a tool for managers to gain and exercise power. Several interviewees point out how poor chemistry between a manager and a subordinate can result in a 'bad grade', which has permanent consequences for the employee's career and salary development. In addition, the less contact there is between manager and subordinate, the easier it is for the manager to give a bad behaviour grade, as a form of reprisal.

In the cases of remote management, the relationship between work and salary is considered to be even more mathematically calculated, as the manager can base their gradings on only a few meetings. Thus, there are stories of strict self-disciplining in the twice a year departmental meeting, in order to avoid giving the manager a negative impression on these few, rare occasions, to impress them.

P@N is also seen as a system best suited for highly educated and careerist landlubbers. This is also a criticism of the system's standardisation, which makes it impossible to address certain occupations and skills. The system is thus considered to be made by and for middle management, focussing on relational activities.

This group is also troubled by the general development of the organisation in recent years. They suggest a shift in the organisation, from that of a worker collective, to one in which the individual is responsible for solving their own tasks. They suggest that Human Resources (HR) has been transformed from something that links management and non-management, into a tool purely for managerial control, a control based on a clear division of the company into different units with separate Key Performance Indicators, deliverables, and targets to be met. These are then included in P@N as different standards for the workers to be measured and graded by, and both the difference in standards, and the fact that they are used for measuring, are considered problematic from this position.

Position 3: Something That 'Just Has to Be Done'

Lastly, one group considers P@N something that 'just has to be done' and considers some elements of the process as positive – others negative.

Their main objection is that there should be *daily* feedback and contact between manager and subordinate, not merely occasional and ritualised forms of feedback like P@N. The group further suggests that P@N can function as a means of speaking out, and mentions managers who have used P@N instead of raising a difficult issue directly with the subordinate. They also point out that P@N, when considered as a career development system, works best for highly educated employees at the beginning of the career ladder and salary scale. Furthermore, P@N is perceived as HR's way of conducting personnel and resource management. P@N is thus considered suitable for personnel administration, but not as a system for learning and development.

The consequence of this attitude towards P@N, is that it is relegated to something that 'just has to be done', a kind of nuisance with little effect on – and of little consequence for – employees. Several managers tell us how they carry out their evaluations with a minimum of effort, so they can instead spend time having separate meetings with their subordinates. Both managers and non-managers alike describe how they paste ready-made sentences into the evaluation forms in order to avoid wasting any more time or thought than necessary. One interviewee sums it up for us: 'It is just a farce!'

In contrast to the two previous positions, this group does not describe P@N as making any big difference either way. This attitude seems to stem from a position at the top of the salary scale (meaning that the grades do not affect their salary), or from an environment in which managers have succeeded in gaming the system. In sum, they thus do not think that their situation can be meaningfully affected by numerical assessments, so they have devised alternative strategies that they find more effective.

P@N as a Fetishising Machine

Formally, employees receive 'numerical evaluations' in P@N. But every interviewee consistently refers to these numbers as their 'grades'. The vast majority of them furthermore associate P@N mainly with grading, and its associated effect on salary development. Though statistics indicate that most employees are reasonably satisfied with P@N, the qualitative data reveals that different employees discuss and understand P@N very differently – and that there are numerous aspects that are not viewed favourably at all.

We will now move beyond the employees' own impressions of P@N, and try to say something about what the system does to people, and to the world, based on these impressions.

The system evaluation was performed at the behest of Northoil, and interviews were therefore booked through their management and HR. As a result, interviews simply popped up in the interviewees' calendars, with allocated times and places, and some minimal information. For many, particularly for middle managers, an average workday consists in going from meeting to meeting, without necessarily being fully aware of – or prepared for – the next meeting. Every interview therefore started in much the same way: the interviewee(s) entered the room, sat down, unpacked their laptop, and optionally, other necessary management tools, and prepared themselves for what they expected to be another standard meeting. We then asked them if they knew why they were here – what the meeting was about. As we explained the purpose of our meeting, laptops and other tools were put away as a discussion of the workday, and how P@N affects their life, emerged.

Every discussion touched on both being graded, and grading others. As university employees, we have ourselves graded many exams, a craft that we find difficult enough in itself – but we cannot even begin to imagine how we would approach the task of grading someone 'as a person', as opposed to merely grading their work. We were therefore not surprised to hear many interviewees tell us that being reduced to a number[8] is offensive to them. Gunhild Tøndel (2017) writes about the violation of being so reduced.[9] Her interviews reveal how the number leaves its impression on the person's body, and how it feels like the number takes precedence over them as a whole person. Several interviewees told us how terrible they felt after receiving a 'bad grade', insinuating that they somehow identify with their marks. Tøndel also points out how some people nonetheless try to play the numbers game, which is exactly what certain of our interviewees did, in elaborating different strategies for obtaining a desirable grade.

8 As discussed by several others, even though Norway has been shielded to a greater extent than most other countries from the worst forms of 'neoliberal governance by numbers' (Kuldova, 2021, p. 46), it is precisely through the discomfort and offense of being reduced and managed through numbers that the consequences of this logic emerge most clearly also in Norway. (See also Tjora, 2019; Kjeldstadli, 2010.)

9 Tøndel writes about a Norwegian public registry of statistics pertaining to public caregiving, and the people who have become statistics in this registry.

An example of a value that we find particularly difficult, and indeed absurd to evaluate, was the company value[10] of openness. An employee's 'openness' is assessed in both the ESV and the behaviour evaluation. Considering openness as mere behaviour is not exactly straightforward. It is surely also a value. It could even be said to be a mode of being, a coming-into presence. Is there indeed any behaviour which is *purely* behaviour? Do similar objections not hold for values as well? In any event, the employees' quality of openness must be a core component of the desired company culture of openness, and it seems that openness here does not really mean an openness to being, but rather the willingness to become transparent, and therefore under control.

However, most of our interviewees do not find the prospect of quantifying values and behaviour as absurd as we do. Young middle managers in particular thought it was good that these were included in the evaluation of the employee, that the evaluation was not based exclusively on performance.

In order to poke at this a bit, we asked interviewees to explain the scale to us. When explaining what the extremes of the scale signified – that is, the difference between receiving 1 or 6 in openness – most interviewees comfortably manage to convey this difference, illustrating a closed and an open person through body language and tone of voice. But distinguishing between, say, a 3 and 4 in openness, proves substantially more difficult. Many interviewees suggest that these nuances are based on a subtle feeling that they get. Others try to ground their evaluation in more objective criteria, but struggle to do so, as body language and tone of voice no longer suffice to articulate the difference.

It becomes clear to us that the openness mark cannot be understood merely as a quality of the person being graded, that is, the person's openness. Rather, it speaks to the relationship between the grader and the graded. The subtle degrees of openness articulate something about how well these two people know each other, how comfortable they are in each other's company, whether they have any quarrels or conflicts, and so on. Openness marks

10 The values of Northoil: *Open* – we promote transparency, we embrace diversity and new perspectives, we raise ethical dilemmas and act with integrity; *Collaborative* – we work together as one team, we share knowledge and help each other succeed, we engage with, respect, and earn the trust of our business partners and society; *Courageous* – we are curious, innovative and commercial, we continuously improve, we use foresight, identify opportunities and manage risk; *Caring* – we seek zero harm to people, we respect each other, and contribute to a positive working environment, we act in sustainable, ethical, and socially responsible ways (from the 'Northoil book').

can in this way be understood as expressing how the grader feels about their relationship to the graded. This point, that what the grade expresses is in fact a relation – and more precisely how the one that does the grading understands and experiences this relation – is nevertheless hidden. What remains after the evaluation is simply a grade assigned to the other person in the relation, attributed to this person as a resource. The relation is thus transformed into an attribute ascribed to the receiving end in the relationship, through the quantification mechanisms in P@N.

Thus the P@N process echoes Bruno Latour's (1999) point about how objects of science are defined by their ascribed attributes. The worker is articulated as a resource for management control. This is what Sørhaug (2017) describes as a fetishisation of relationships, where relationships are articulated as a value of the individual. The fetishisation itself forms the core of this objectification, thus transforming the human being into – what we have elsewhere (Røyrvik & Berntsen, 2022) described as – a technological articulation, and, as Han (2015, p. 3) observes, this articulation 'flattens out the human being itself, making it a functional element within a system'.

Fredy Perlman (2017) discusses how people reproduce themselves by alienating their activity, and embodying it in commodities as material receptacles of human labour. By calling P@N a fetishising machine, we want to show how P@N secures the worker as a technological quantity that can be controlled to achieve better performance, behaviour, and values. The term 'performance management system' is therefore completely precise, since P@N is a fetishising machine that transforms the person, with their performance, behaviour, and values, into a manageable object of technological control. And, as Perlman argues, power moves from the worker to this object. In other words, 'the fetish worshipper emasculates himself and attributes virility to his fetish' (p. 42).

A Question of Power

P@N, through the many examples of self-disciplining, is an example of what Michel Foucault (2019) called biopower, whereby people are managed through a techno-logic of control. The power of the evaluation is encoded in the worker, who modifies their behaviour accordingly, possibly even on a subconscious level as well. Workers' bodies thus become objects of power in a disciplinary system. This is in keeping with Tøndel, who points

out – via Foucault – that procedures and technics for mapping, surveilling, and governing, are at the heart of the modern exploitation of power.

Foucault (1977) used Jeremy Bentham's panopticon – a prison design wherein a single warden can observe every prisoner, without the prisoners knowing whether they are currently being watched – as a metaphor for the modern disciplinary society, whereby all aspects of social life are surveilled and subjected to self-regulation for fear of punishment. P@N, however, may be better understood as a case of what Han (p. vii) calls the *digital panopticon*, observing how these differ from Foucault's disciplinary panopticons, wherein occupants 'were isolated from each other for more thorough surveillance, … not permitted to speak. The inhabitants of the digital panopticon, on the other hand, engage in lively communication and bare themselves of their own free will. In this way, they actively *collaborate* in the digital panopticon.' Despite the fact that some (notably the group in the second position described above) dislike P@N, everyone more or less collaborates with P@N, irrespective of their enthusiasm for doing so.

Individualisation and the Internal Labour Market

Perhaps even more important, and somewhat left unsaid, is the way in which the trade unions lost a great deal of power through P@N. The system, and therefore the fetishisation, calculation, and grading – due to the system's connection with wage settlement – fits neatly into what is often called the Norwegian or Nordic model, namely a tripartite collaboration. However, through P@N, one's salary does not result from agreements and negotiations, but rather from calculation of the individual's achievements and attitudes. And with this sidelining of unions, salary settlements are no longer a matter of fairness according to agreement, but rather of correctness according to calculation. Rather than a negotiation between the workers and the unions, emphasising joint and collective group interests, workers are rewarded as individuals.

In this way, P@N actualises and reintroduces tensions and controversies which are built into the very structures of capitalistic working life, especially those pertaining to individualisation, the development of an internal labour market, and the technological control of both individuals and the labour market. In *Manufacturing Consent*, Burawoy (1979), through an analysis of changes on the factory floor and management at the US

company, Allied, over the course of 30 years, describes how a labour market defines: (1) occupations, (2) workers, and (3) the rules for which workers get which jobs. In analysing the 30-year development, it becomes clear that a strong internal labour market has developed, leading to greater mobility for the workers *within* the factory, and less *between* factories. Consequently, profits are hidden and secured in new ways as: (1) the factory internalises characteristics from the external market, competing individuals, and individualism; and (2) factory mobility dissolves most of the tensions between workers and management, as it is transformed into mobility between competing individuals.

An internal labour market implies that the company has developed institutions for political processes within the company. Burawoy focusses particularly on institutions for collective bargaining and complaints, and shows how the advanced stages of capitalism incorporate the formation of class compromise between workers and management, which Burawoy says is an internal state through which institutions organise, transform, and suppress struggles over relations in and of production on the corporate level.

Burawoy's analysis is based on American working life, and development in the period 1945–1975, and as Marietta L. Baba (2009) points out – and we describe this in more detail in the last section – unions and labour rights were already weakened compared to Europe, and benefits were already understood as rewards functioning as instruments for increasing worker activity and efficiency. An important point to understand here is that the Norwegian model is by no means a model that can, for example, be neatly introduced into a company in the US labour market. This so-called model is not really a company model, but rather a social contract with conflicts and negotiations underlying the rules of working life and practice. In an American capitalist system, the benefits of the Norwegian 'model' will appear as being the company's benevolent prerogative, and function as welfare capitalism rather than welfare as such.

P@N – as a system and digital infrastructure – was created and coded by an American consulting company (Mackenzie), for American working life. This means that the understanding of control and resource management inscribed in P@N is tailored to an American, individualised, competition driven internal market. Through this, the system changes the very rules of collaboration and negotiation between the parties. It is difficult to resist this logic, as these changes have been introduced through 'digital resource management'. Such systems are introduced everywhere today, so

that management can manage workers precisely as company resources. And this is how we can understand P@N, as both a driver and a symptom of the neo-liberalisation of the labour market, in promoting: (1) market supremacy; (2) 'human capital' as the goal of all activity; (3) the need for incentive and revision in all institutions; and (4) the loss of union power and legitimacy, as well as the lessened impact of collective bargaining.

Objects@Northoil

P@N may be understood as a symptom of global worklife megatrends, such as neo-liberalisation, anti-democratisation, and individualisation of labour life. However, its logic may be understood equally well as one of the integral parts and driving forces of these trends.

The need for systems like P@N is itself a global trend, and as such a symptom of our age. Following Heidegger (1977), we understand an age as grounded 'through a specific interpretation of what is, and through a specific comprehension of truth'; '[t]his basis holds complete dominion over all the phenomena that distinguish the age' (p. 115). We suggest (Røyrvik & Berntsen, 2022) that our age is one in which the world is articulated as technology. It is the age when each phenomenon is always-already conquered as technology through an objectification, which inscribes a specific instrumental logic turning everything into a resource. In corporate (emic) terms, this resource is a (liquifiable) asset. Heidegger (1977, pp. 3–35) calls this process the 'standing-reserve', wherein beings are revealed – technologically articulated – as resources. Everything is reduced to its potential. In this way, the standing-reserve does not refer to the stock of resources as such, as much as to the world's coming into presence as a stock of resources. That which is not subjugated into this stock, does not exist.

Perlman (2017) argues that our daily activities reproduce our 'social form of daily life', and the daily activity of our age is the reduction of everything to an object. This reduction is 'gigantic', to borrow another phrase from Heidegger (1977). Every employee evaluates and is evaluated through P@N, the whole year round. This, as a daily activity, is an example of what Heidegger calls the 'ongoing activity' of amassing an ever-increasing number of objects, objectifying towards both the infinitely huge (such as solar systems, or even galaxies – or P@N's 'culture of openness') and minute (such as cells, or even quarks – or the 'openness' particular to each of us). It is ongoing precisely because it reproduces itself in and for itself.

The gigantic is however not merely this 'endlessly extended emptiness of the purely quantitative', but 'rather, that through which the quantitative becomes a special quality and thus a remarkable kind of greatness' (p. 135). This very process is itself unquantifiable and so does not exist. The conquering of objects is unconquerable – objectification is not an object. And when an object is revealed, everything that escapes its articulation as object is ontologically concealed. We name this age elsewhere (Berntsen 2022) *gigantiquity*, the age wherein the world assumes form through and as its conquest into technology. Though people can be more or less open, in P@N 'openness' exists only as a technological attribute. The metaphysics of gigantiquity is grounded on such technological articulations of the world through the technological conquering of the world, and this is expressed through the aesthetics, ethics, and epistemology of gigantiquity, all of which presume the technological articulation of the world.

Ours is the age of objects, or more precisely, the age of objectification. But Heidegger explains that it is therefore also necessarily the age of subjects – the subjects who give meaning to objects. Tord Larsen (2009) describes the subject's self-objectification, whereby the subject seeks its own objectivity. The grades workers receive as part of P@N are an instance of precisely this. They are *objective*. The quality of being objective does not mean that something is somehow more correct, neutral, or pure. It simply means that something, in this instance a subject, has become an object in the world's transformation into technology. And though the grade-object is revealed through a rigorous method, this method, this conquering, conceals the uncertain assessment that enables it. This is in some ways the very point of objectification itself. In revealing the object as meaningless, that is, as divorced from the uncertainty of its many connections, these may all be disregarded, permitting the use of the object in an exact science. It may thus be measured and considered by itself, objectively. Objectivity is gigantiquity's greatness, and so the workers identify with their 'bad grades' and feel bad when their personality is objectified by a low mark.

For the purpose of calculating salary settlements, the workers are replaced by their grades. The objectivity of the grade-objects enables their juxtaposition and calculation. The grades reveal the worker-subject as an object, which conceals everything that eludes this object. The objectivity of the grades ensures controllable entities. P@N produces these objects precisely in order to conquer and control all aspects of the workers. Note that we do not here mean to suggest that P@N was developed with the

intention to control workers in the sense of exercising some malevolent domination over the workers' behaviour – although it might have this potential – but rather that it is intended to control, in the sense of being in control and making sense of, a large number of workers in a way that yields a satisfactory salary settlement. And this sense of control is enabled by the technological conquering of the worker's performance, behaviour, and values. As we write elsewhere (Røyrvik & Almklov, 2012, p. 631), part of the gigantic objectification process is the development of standards that ensure their control – that is, objectification 'is a means of domesticating and controlling risk'.

In this way, P@N entails a new kind of power that emerges in, and as, gigantiquity. As Fyhn et al. (2021) show, the transformation of power takes on a particular pattern today. By increasingly attending to technological systems, power moves not from one person to another, but rather from people to techno-logics. The technological society itself accumulates power, rendering people impotent. It becomes altogether unclear how to resist and oppose such power.

Fyhn et al. (2021), writing about P@N, among other examples, describe digitalisation as a key element – rather than a cause – of this pattern. Digitalisation shapes the pattern's megarectic potential through simultaneously enabling and requiring certain forms of technological articulation, which increasingly enable and require standardisation and quantification. Thus, digitalisation not only accelerates the technological conquest of the world, but the technological conquest of the world now takes the form of acceleration. Specifically, it takes the form of the gigantic. Digital resources can be infinitely divided, quantified, and specialised, as well as infinitely copied. This is because they are always-already gigantic.

This happens in P@N, in which all three evaluations are performed by people assigning numbers, which are then aggregated by the digital system. Every evaluation is automatically registered (and therefore everyone who does not perform the evaluation is also registered), producing large quantities of data that enable Northoil to compare the individual to groups of employees, and even enable external companies, if they use evaluation systems from the same consultancy, to compare their data to Northoil's data. Additionally, change over time and trends may be calculated relative to individuals, companies, even globally – which in turn can be used by the consultancy company to improve the evaluation itself. And all this data create a sort of technological debt version of the sunken cost fallacy,

whereby the trends and changing metadata become as important as the data themselves, discouraging any change to the system. In this way, P@N also demonstrates how digital systems are designed to manage their digital resources through a particular decontextualisation, whereby the resource objects become arguably more important than their circumstances. As we will return to later, this is a form of fetishisation whereby metadata are transformed into commodities and are thus not only decontextualised from the original situation, but also from P@N and the digital system which performed said decontextualisation in the first place. The drop-down menu power of the system ensures that each step in the evaluation process is mandatory and unavoidable, as opposed to the negotiation that would occur naturally in a conversation.

Gigantiquity is home to what Tim Ingold (2000, pp. 209–218) calls 'the withdrawal of the human presence from the centre to the periphery of the lifeworld', a tendency reflected in several modes of today's work life (Ingold, 2000, pp. 294–311). P@N imbues the design of the digital system with more power, as opposed to the worker who uses it, thus accordingly transferring human agency from the centre to the periphery of the salary settlement process. Gigantiquity is in many ways an age of impotence, since the subject becomes object, and power transfers not from subject to subject, but from the centre to the periphery of human life. One possible result of this is what Gunther Anders (2014) calls Promethean shame, 'which is the shame the worker [feels] when confronted by the machine … that consisted in the sense that he was less perfect than the machine' (p. 65). Indeed, some employees were quite upset at receiving low grades. At the same time, other employees support Anders's (p. 15) other thesis, whereby the worker no longer experiences this Promethean shame, 'something that would certainly justify a second kind of shame, since it is not very honorable to resign oneself to' being a mere machine part.

One serious implication of the modern power transformation, pointed out by Fyhn et al. (2021), is how any opposition to the P@N system likely results in its 'improvement' or substitution for a similar system. That is, protesting P@N is of no consequence to the underlying logic itself. This is also related to how, as we write elsewhere (Berntsen, 2022), mistaking social problems for mere technical problems permits only technical solutions. Similarly, once the worker-subject has become an object, it is the object that matters – a sentiment echoed by both our interviewees and Tøndel (2017). Holistic matters of concern are thus reduced to partial matters of

facts in gigantiquity. Such facts can be techno-logically arranged, and thus concerned parties such as trade unions give way to technical systems or, to borrow some phrases from Han (2015): facts, being additive, enable acceleration, and so narrative processions – which cannot be accelerated – must give way to processors.

Workers grade each other, and in some cases even embrace self-objectification – provided it comes with an increased salary! This is a case of what Ingold (2000, pp. 294–311) describes as people authoring their own dehumanisation. While some of the people we talked to were acutely aware of this irony, and described being graded as a violation, others thought it was very nice to receive a high grade, and a correspondingly high salary. (Anders would ask them if they were not ashamed of this.) This individualisation is in keeping with humanity's withdrawal from the centre to the periphery through techno-logics, enabled and to some degree necessitated by a reliance on technological artifacts, such as digital systems. As we discuss elsewhere in the context of a political party (Berntsen, 2019[11]), gigantic organisations assume a form that rewards those who excel in the technological articulation of instrumentality. Gigantiquity rewards self-objectification with capital, in this case an increased salary compared to others.

From the Welfare State to Welfare Capitalism

With the Hawthorne experiments,[12] Elton Mayo demonstrated the importance of informal structures and patterns arising from social groups in the workplace, and the underlying tension between the managerial logic of cost and efficiency, and the workers' logic of sentiment (Friedmann & Sheppard, 1949). Though the general idea was to impose efficiency onto workers from above, the Hawthorne experiments found such attempts nullified by the workers' actual behaviour. Though calculations based on economic incentives anticipated that workers would work as hard as they possibly could in order to increase their wages (which were tied to how much they produced), the experiment found that workers in fact restricted their output to ensure nobody had to work harder than they were able.

11 See also our discussion and contextualising of this case in Røyrvik and Berntsen, 2022.

12 The Hawthorn experiments refer to the Western Electric Company's Hawthorn Project, based in Cicero, IL, research dedicated to the improvement of industrial productivity through experimental changes in working conditions within a large formal organisation (Roethisberger & Dickson, 1939).

The formal organisation of the factory lost out to the workers' own non-formal organisation – 'the logic of efficiency blocked by a logic of sentiment' (p. 205). The workers did not act solely according to economic considerations, rather they acted according to the whole of their environment. In other words, they did not act as anticipated by a logic that places humans at its periphery, but rather according to a human-centric logic, by which they are 'wholly immersed in the relational nexus of its instrumental "coping" in the world' (Ingold, 2000, pp. 406–419).

With P@N, however, a large portion of the workers are more than happy to submit to a capitalist logic, provided it means they increase their earnings. Informal group sentiment has given way to an individualised internal job market, as described by Burawoy. Thus, it seems that what the managers in the Hawthorne experiment got wrong was not the capitalist logic itself. Their error was to attempt to enforce this logic from above. The solution, it seems, is to build it from the ground up, and to substitute objects for workers, which 'prove transparent' because they have 'shed all negativity', ''are smoothed out and leveled', and 'do not resist being integrated into smooth streams of capital, communication, and information' (Han, 2015, p. 1).

In sidestepping a more social salary negotiation, P@N is part of the individualisation of working life. This transformation is often connected to neoliberalism by social scientists, but there is also a case to be made for its compatibility with the Nordic welfare state. Mark Graham (2002, p. 204) points out a peculiar aspect of Swedish social life, whereby there is '[o]utside a clearly defined circle of family and friends, … no compunction to be sociable or even acknowledge the presence of another person unless it has been agreed on in advance.' Graham further connects this to the welfare state and 'the stress on independence that is central to the welfare state ideology of the "strong society"'. In Graham's analysis, the Swedish welfare state seeks above all to produce security (*trygghet*) for its citizens, by providing healthcare, education, unemployment benefits, and so on. This creates a unique type of individualism, which in social life 'translates into independence, the avoidance – even dread – of relationships of debt with other people, and wanting to have strong control over the frequency and intensity of social contacts'. Living in Norway, we can safely say that Graham's observations from Sweden could equally well have been made here. The welfare state thus produces its own brand of individualisation.

No wonder then, that the Nordic welfare state has become a model for welfare capitalism. Just like the welfare state's well-meaning paternalism

creates and exacerbates individualism, so too does welfare capitalism. However, whereas the welfare state's primary task is to produce (for example social and medical) security for its citizens, this is merely a means to an end in welfare capitalism.[13] Here the end is the production of efficient workers, who in turn generate capital – two aspects of the same phenomenon, since capital, Perlman (2017, p. 54) reminds us, 'is equal to the sum of unpaid labor performed by generations of human beings whose lives consisted of the daily alienation of their living activity'. As such, the main difference between the production of security in the welfare state and in welfare capitalism, is whether security is produced through a logic of sentiment, or a logic of cost and efficiency.

Through its techno-logic of governance at a time of financial abundance, P@N is a herald of welfare capitalism. It is only one of many such systems, which both build and build *on* the selfsame techno-logics present everywhere in New Public Management and neo-liberalisation. Together this leads to anti-democratisation by expelling human judgement and discretion. It is the reign of resource custodianship. As such, P@N is one of many structures of capitalist working life, which both harbours its own individualisation and technological control, and simultaneously furthers them as global techno-logics. It does this, according to Burawoy's analysis, through internalising the logic of markets, enabling internal mobility. These movements are all part and parcel of the logic of digital objects, and thus they are at once technological and capitalist.

P@N is one of the many technological reward mechanisms, whereby welfare capitalism is increasingly replacing the welfare state as the provider of security. We see an individual sense of security tied to capital emerging in our time of financial abundance, and gradually replacing the need for a communal, that is, a social sense of security. It is said that there is safety in numbers, but in capitalist society it seems that 'numbers' refers principally to money, not people. If we persist on this antisocial trajectory, we may as well say farewell to welfare.

13 Of course, the welfare state could rightfully be said to produce security as a means of controlling its citizens. (Keeping in mind our previous discussion of what we mean by *control*.) However, the citizens, people, cannot meaningfully be said to be the means of a state in the way that they are means to capital for a corporation.

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