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Critical Human Resource Management

**The Reproduction of Symbolic Structures in the Organizational Lifeworld
through the Case of the Colonization of Corporate Christmas**

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Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Contents.....	5
List of Figures and Tables.....	9
Introduction.....	10
Part I: The Critical Paradigm in Organizational Research.....	19
I.1. Critical Management Studies.....	19
I.1.1. De-naturalization, anti-performativity and reflexivity in critical management studies.....	24
I.1.2. Various Streams in Critical Management Studies.....	27
I.1.2.1. Critical theory, post-modernism and critical realism.....	28
I.1.2.2. Rifts in Critical Management Studies.....	30
I.2. Critical Theory.....	36
I.2.1. Birth and History of the Frankfurt School.....	37
I.2.2. The Three Major Sociological Pillars of Critical Theory.....	38
I.2.3. Dominant Trains of Thought in Critical Theory.....	43
I.2.4 The Social Theory of Habermas.....	47
I.2.4.1. System and Lifeworld.....	49
I.2.4.2. Colonization of the Lifeworld.....	58
I.3. Critical Theory in Organizational Research.....	61
I.3.1. Organizational Ideology and/or Organizational Communication.....	62
I.3.2. The Corporation as Colonizing Power.....	67
I.3.3. Management as Colonizing Power.....	72
Part II: Critical Human Resource Management.....	75
II.1. Mainstream and Critical Approaches in Human Resource Management.....	75
II.1.1. Typologies in the Field of Human Resource Management.....	75
II.1.2. Mainstream Approaches in Human Resource Management.....	78
II.1.3. Critical Approaches in Human Resource Management.....	84
II.2. The Habermasian Analysis of Human Resource Management.....	92
II.2.1. Historical Analysis of Human Resource Management.....	93
II.2.1.1. History of the Development of Human Resource Management.....	93
II.2.1.2. Crisis Tendencies of Capitalism.....	96
II.2.1.3. Human Resource Management as an Attempt to Solve the Legitimation and Motivation Crisis.....	98

II.2.2. The Role of Human Resource Management in the Reproduction of the Lifeworld	100
II.2.2.1. Workplace Culture in a Habermasian Approach	102
II.2.2.2. Workplace Communities in a Habermasian Approach	104
II.2.2.3. Workplace Identity and Motivation in a Habermasian Approach	106
II.2.2.4. Summary	108
Part III: The Critical Analysis of Corporate Christmas	109
III.1. Corporate Christmas as a Subject of Critical Research	109
III.2. Christmas as a Social Holiday	110
III.3. Christmas as a Corporate Holiday	111
Part IV: Methodology	116
IV.1. Research Objective and Questions	116
IV.2. Critical Ethnography	117
IV.3. Sampling and Data Collection	119
IV.3.1. Participant Observation	122
IV.3.2. Qualitative Interviews	124
IV.3.3. Additional Data Collection Techniques	125
IV.4. Data Analysis Methods	126
IV.5. Validity, Reliability and Generalizability of the Research	128
IV.6. Ethical Considerations	133
Part V: Results of the Case Study: Family-Friendly Christmas at Engineer Co.	135
V.1. About the Company	135
V.1.1. The Founding of the Company and Its Transformation into a Group	135
V.1.2. The Cultural Effects of the Formal Organizational Structure	138
V.1.3. Organizational Culture	139
V.1.3.1. Family-friendliness	139
V.1.3.2. Security That Comes at a Price	140
V.1.3.3. Conservative Values	141
V.1.3.4. Becoming Multinational	142
V.1.3.5. Professional Culture: Engineer-elitism	143
V.2. A Christmas of Engineers	143
V.2.1. The Christmas Period	144

V.2.2. St Nicholas Day	147
V.2.3. Script Elements of the Corporate Christmas Party	150
V.2.3.1. Outward Impressions: Venue and Appearance	151
V.2.3.2. Greeting	156
V.2.3.3. Managers' Speeches	157
V.2.3.4. Awards.....	162
V.2.3.5. Dinner	163
V.2.3.6. Lottery	164
V.2.3.7. Carnavalesque Elements: music, dancing, alcohol	166
V.2.3.8. Christmas Presents	167
V.2.3.9. Script Elements of the Corporate Christmas Party – Summary	168
V.3. Layers of Meaning of Corporate Christmas	169
V.3.1. Family-friendly Workplace and Work-friendly Family.....	170
V.3.1.1. Together Like a Family	170
V.3.1.2. Like One's Extended Family.....	173
V.3.1.3. Reinforcing Traditional Gender Roles	174
V.3.1.4. A Christmas of Outsiders	177
V.3.1.5. Family-friendliness in Everyday Life: Similarities and Contradictions.....	181
V.3.2. Gift-giving at Christmas.....	183
V.3.2.1. The Christmas Party and St Nicholas Day as Presents	183
V.3.2.2. Charity	186
V.3.2.3. Christmas Gifts to the Employees	187
V.3.3. Christmas Carnival.....	187
V.3.4. The System of Relationships Between the Layers of Meaning of Corporate Christmas	188
Part VI: Conclusions	193
VI.1. The Manifestation of the Tensions at the Border Between System and Lifeworld Through Corporate Christmas	193
VI.1.1. Cultural Reproduction: The Loss of Meaning of „Christmas” in the Corporate Setting	193

VI.1.2. Community Integration: Weak Ties in Social Relationships	195
VI.1.3. Socialization: Identity Control.....	197
VI.1.4. Christmas Hypocrisy: The System of Distorted Communication	199
VI.2. Relevance of the Theoretical and Empirical Results.....	200
VI.3. Limitations and Future Research Avenues.....	202
References	204

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Structure of the Thesis	15
Figure 2: Streams of Critical Management Studies	35
Table 3: Pure Types of Linguistically Mediated Interaction.....	54
Table 4: Contributions of Reproduction Processes to Maintaining the Structural Components of the Lifeworld.....	55
Table 5: Reproductive Functions of Action Oriented to Mutual Understanding	56
Table 6: Manifestations of Crisis When Reproduction Processes Are Disturbed (Pathologies)	57
Table 7: Types of late-capitalist crisis.....	97
Figure 8: The Engineer Group	137
Table 9: Script elements of the corporate Christmas party	169
Figure 10: Relationships between the metaphors involved in corporate Christmas	191
Appendix 1: Habermasian studies in human resource management, and organizational behavior and culture	215
Appendix 2: Habermasian studies in management sciences	216

Introduction

My dissertation aims at the critical analysis of the so-called *soft* practices in human resource management, building upon the ideas of critical management studies - a school less popular among Hungarian professionals. Though a relatively new topic in Hungarian management sciences, critical management studies have undergone an impressive evolution during the last twenty years of international business studies. Hungarian management research has also generated some socially-critical research papers and publications (Bokor and Radácsi 2006; Csillag 2011; Gelei 2005; Glózer 2011; Nagy and Primecz 2010; Pataki and Radácsi 2000; Pataki and Szántó 2011; Primecz 1999; Primecz 2003), and what is more, critical approaches have for long been part of the syllabus of the course Organization Theories at Corvinus University of Budapest. Still, the literature available in Hungarian is very fragmented, and we have no tradition of targeted research into critical management ideas.

The reason why, in my opinion, this deficiency is especially important to make up for is that during the past twenty years of Hungary's transition to capitalism, the majority of the economic elite and the intellectuals seem to have devoted very little attention to the societal problems arising from the very operation of the capitalist system¹. While striving to catch up with the Western world in terms of economic growth, and to spread the state-of-the-art management techniques considered key to competitiveness, in the year of the regime change, Mintzberg (1989) concludes his popular management book with the assertion: „Society has become unmanageable as a result of management”. A number of Western thinkers have pointed out that Central Eastern European countries would not be able to avoid the problems of Western capitalist societies, like growing social inequalities and the appearance of deep poverty as a result, societal deficiencies originating in consumption-orientation, the ever-growing extent of environmental pollution, the legitimation and motivation crisis caused by the preponderance of economic interests, the commodification of traditions and of our symbolic world of meaning, etc. All the above should make us aware that Hungarian economic intellectuals have a decisive role in what kind of society they are going to create and in whether they will try to learn from the mistakes of the West, instead of their own ones.

¹ I need to mention, however, the research done in the fields of corporate social responsibility and corporate / business ethics, which has, though not necessarily from a critical point of view, significantly contributed to the examination of the influence economic development has on the environment and on social / individual well-being and happiness (Angyal 2009; Boda and Radácsi 1997; Matolay 2010; Pataki and Radácsi 2000; Radácsi 1999; Zsolnai 2001).

And the shaping of the world view of economic intellectuals is something that economic researchers/educators bear great responsibility for. It is these professionals whom my thesis aims to offer a new, inter-disciplinary and truly European perspective for their work organization and management analyses that can break the dominance of American management studies in this field. In critical terms: I would like to contribute to the emancipation of the management researcher/educator community in Hungary.

Critical theory² usually aims to achieve emancipation in two stages, the first being unveiling and unravelling, which primarily takes the form of a critique formulated in theoretical terms, while the second stage is transformation, which rather strives to influence the practical aspects of operation. The present dissertation invites its readers to take the first step by attempting to call attention to the drawbacks of high commitment / high performance work systems (hereinafter also referred to as HPWS), generally considered state-of-the-art in professional circles, both in Hungary and internationally. While concentrating on the dark side of management and work organizations, my analysis will be, in a sense, somewhat one-sided. I will not discuss the progressive corporate practices that promote the ethical operation of corporations and strengthen their social responsibility and pro-environmental commitment; possible forms of resistance; and possible ways of transformation, like opportunities for critical-emancipatory action research (Csillag and Hidegh 2011), will not be covered, either, for these topics would not fit the limits of the present thesis. A very important mission of my future professional life as a critical management researcher will be, however, to promote and include in the academic discussion the practices that are (more) democratic, to become part of the change as an action researcher, and to contribute to the generation of practical knowledge that is useful to the interested parties.

I believe, however, that I first need to strengthen the voices of organizational and social criticism that have remained undeservedly neglected during Hungary's last two decades, through which I would like to contribute to the debunking / revealing phase of emancipation. The reasons for the silence about the criticism of capitalism in Hungarian economist and management circles are no doubt numerous, and their exploration alone could surely produce a very interesting study. Unfortunately, the works of the members of the Frankfurt School were legal (and what is more: recommended) readings during the communist regime, and therefore the Frankfurt line of thought has become the manifestation of the Marxist-Leninist ideology,

² The concepts of critical management theories and critical theory will be clarified at a later stage in the thesis. What I would like to indicate at this point in order to avoid confusion is that my criticism of management draws upon the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, which employs a social theory approach.

the bearer of the past era's sins in the eyes of the majority of political economy students; even though the political system the Eastern Bloc had created could not have been farther from the ideas of the critical school. For example, when the Hungarian Academy of Sciences elected Jürgen Habermas an honorary member in the seventies, he declined the election saying that he did not want to become the awardee of a totalitarian system (Felkai 1993). It is my hope that my dissertation will facilitate the opening up of Hungarian economic intellectuals' minds to the insights offered by the social analysis of the critical school and to a faith in the truly humane mottoes of the Enlightenment, currently overshadowed by the memories of the inhumane historical past.

In line with the values of the Enlightenment – social equality, freedom and solidarity –, those engaged in critical management studies put special emphasis on making marginalized and silenced voices be heard both in social and in academic discussions. My dissertation perfectly meets this criterion, as it aligns with the minority rather than the majority under more than one aspect (see Figure 1). The **paradigm** of organization theory I chose, critical management is itself a lesser known topic in Hungary, and it is not part of the international academic mainstream, either. In the **area of management** I opted for, human resource management, both academics and practicing professionals have for long been fighting for their field to be treated equal to all the other areas of management, for HR to become a respected profession, for its "strategic importance" to be acknowledged. Corporate Christmas, the **organizational phenomenon** I decided to analyze, is a topic largely neglected by organizational researchers, deemed unworthy of academic interest. (To some extent, this was made up for by the special issue of Organization on Christmas, the editorial article of which discussed how unjustified this marginalized situation was (Hancock and Rehn 2011). Finally, I opted for a **research methodology** that is qualitative in nature, which type, though becoming more and more widely used both in Hungary and internationally, has not yet achieved the same degree of acceptance as quantitative techniques have.

These decisions were, however, not made in an arbitrary fashion. As a researcher, I am interested in **how the world of work, how work organizations influence society's cultural-symbolic sphere and world of meaning**, how they shape community norms and solidarity, how they affect the individual's self-image, state of mind, desires, convictions and their moral and spiritual background. I am convinced that one of the most important tasks and objectives of human resource management – and especially of its soft approaches – is to manage the

symbolic sphere, community solidarity and individuals' motivations and self-identities (that is: the so-called lifeworld).

The various festivities, rituals and ceremonies are prominent scenes of the renewal of our identities, the community and our cultural knowledge. This is why I chose as the subject of my work the festivity that has been the most important one in European cultures throughout their (almost) entire history: the celebration of the winter solstice, that is, Christmas. The phenomenon might well have been neglected by organizational researchers, yet those holding the power have never made such a mistake. No matter which age we look at, the prevailing power centers – the Church, the communist party or, later, the corporations – have always aspired to have a central role in the holiday, they have always strived to influence the Christmas-related activities, habits and interpretations of everyday people. In Hungary, a particularly interesting aspect is that during the last century, the celebration of Christmas has become a sort of symbol for the dual lifeworld that had evolved during the communist dictatorship (for details, see (Sík 2010). The short story *Decemberi nagylemez* (approx.: "December LP") by Éva Janikovszky (2004) gives a bittersweet account of how the life strategies of this dual lifeworld are handed down generation by generation:

„What the difference is between Santa Claus and Father Christmas, well, actually nothing, or more exactly that Santa Claus is officially Father Christmas, but here at home, we call him Santa Claus, yes, exactly like Cucika is called Cucika by his mother even though his name really is Szabolcs and not Cucika. What have you heard in the church? So your great-granny took you again? That the real name of Santa Claus is not Father Christmas but Saint Nicholas? Well, this is also true, because you know, once upon a time there was a bishop who lived a holy life, and was very fond of children, and kept giving presents to them all the time. It is in his memory that Santa Claus is called Santa Claus. What? Whether the bishop is a greater man than the very-important-secretary-of-the-trade-union-committee?” (...)

„What do you want to ask Father Christmas? Why he doesn't give a present on the birthday of the Baby Jesus? This is what you want to ask this Pócs, this very-important-secretary-of-the-trade-union-committee at the union's Santa Claus party?! Emőke, you're driving me mad, I won't even take you there, has all this talking been in vain? How on Earth can you not get it into your head that the union's Father Christmas is one thing, Santa Claus is a different thing, and so is the bishop and the very-important-secretary-of-the-trade-union-committee, and Christmas is yet another different thing, which we only celebrate at home, and which is the birthday of Baby Jesus only when we are at home, because in there, it is the holiday of love and peace! (...) What is there not to understand about this?”

From the LP on the capitalist equivalent of the communist Christmas, the side about consumption orientation and about shopping malls as the temples of consumption does already exist. My research is a "song" from the other side, the one about corporate Christmas as a team

building event and identity construct. And for the analysis of the symbolic domain, the world of meaning and the identity construct, the qualitative tradition is undoubtedly the one to offer the most consistent set of methodological tools.

The structure of the dissertation is outlined in figure 1.

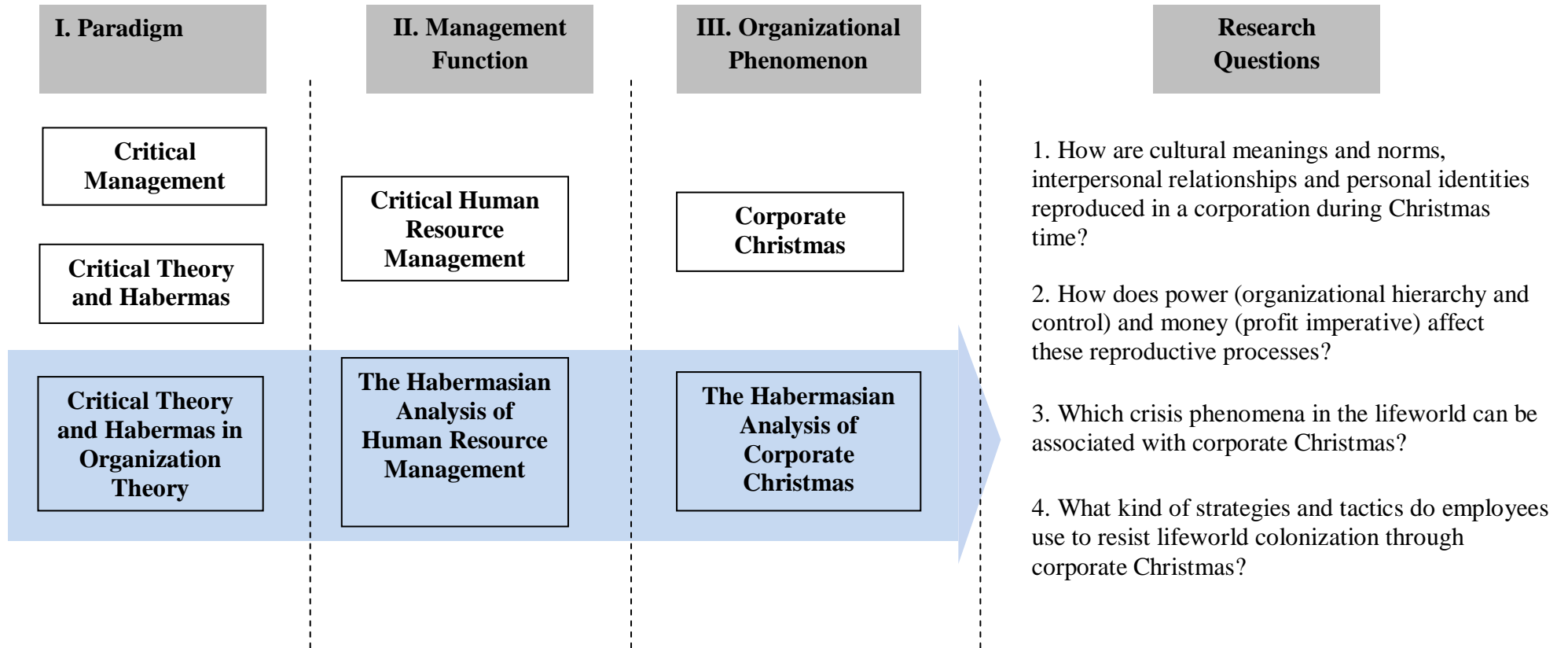
The theoretical part of the dissertation comprises six major structural elements:

- the first part presents the critical paradigm (as related to organization theory), which provides the conceptual framework of our analysis;
- the second part deals with the management function that constitutes our unit of analysis, that is, human resource management, from a critical approach;
- while the third part contains the critical analysis of the organizational phenomenon my research is focused on: corporate Christmas;
- the fourth part states the research questions and presents the research methodology, i.e. critical ethnography;
- in the fifth part, the research results are discussed; and
- the sixth part acquaints the reader with the main conclusions of the thesis by interpreting the results in a Habermasian theoretical framework.

Next comes the formulation of the research questions, followed by the discussion of the research methodology.

(1) The first chapter of the first part gives an account of the differences between critical management studies and their mainstream counterparts, along with a short introduction to the main trends in critical management studies, and to the major rifts, debated views. This is where the various trends' critiques against each other are discussed, as well, thus there will be no separate chapter on the critiques of critical theory and Habermas. In the second chapter, I narrow down the focus of my analysis to one specific stream within critical management studies, namely critical theory, and to the school that has been associated with it, the Frankfurt School; and more specifically, to the communication theory put forward by Habermas. At the same time, however, I do also expand my focus insofar as I discuss critical theory as a trend in sociological theory and in social philosophy, introducing the most important sociological concepts that were later adopted by organization theory. This is the chapter where Habermas's system / lifeworld theory is discussed in detail, which provides the basic theoretical and conceptual framework of my research.

Figure 1: Structure of the Thesis



IV. Research Methodology

Critical ethnography

- participant observation
- interviews
- document analysis
- photography

V. Research Results

The script elements and symbolic system of corporate Christmas

Layers of meaning of corporate Christmas.

Three metaphors:

- family
- gift
- carnival

VI. Conclusion

Corporate Christmas as

- response to crisis phenomena in the lifeworld
- collective defence mechanism
- dramaturgical behavior: manipulation and self-deceit
- system of distorted communication

The third subchapter concentrates on the applications of critical theory in organization theory. First, the major research topics associated with critical theory are outlined in general, distinguishing between ideology critique (based on the works of the first generation of the Frankfurt School) and communication theory analyses (primarily inspired by Habermas's social theory). The second part of the chapter is, for the most part, devoted to the Habermasian organization analyses comprising the very backbone of my thesis, giving a detailed account of corporations' and management's colonizing effect on the lifeworld.

(2) The first chapter of the second part clarifies the distinction between critical human resource management and mainstream human resource management, and positions the dissertation's topic within the field. The second chapter is focused on the Habermasian analysis of human resource management, partly by looking at the role of human resource management in the correction of the crisis tendencies of capitalism from a historical perspective, and partly by examining, from a social theory point of view, the role human resource management has in the reproduction and / or the colonization of the lifeworld.

(3) In the **third part** I introduce the research topic: corporate Christmas, with a brief discussion of Christmas as a social holiday, pointing out its relevance to management science. Next I summarize the lessons from the very few existing studies on corporate Christmas and interpret their findings in the Habermasian theoretical framework.

(4) In the fourth part, the following research questions are formulated, as based on the preceding theoretical chapters:

- How are cultural meanings and norms, interpersonal relationships and personal identities reproduced in a corporation during Christmas time?
- How does power (organizational hierarchy and control) and money (profit imperative) affect these reproductive processes?
- Which crisis phenomena in the lifeworld can be associated with corporate Christmas?
- What kind of strategies and tactics do employees use to resist lifeworld colonization through corporate Christmas?

Then follows the presentation of the research methodology I chose: critical ethnography, along with an in-depth discussion of the specific methodological decisions made in the course of the research project.

(5) The fifth part presents the research results. The first chapter deals with organizational context. The second one reviews the presence of Christmas in the organization examined through the discussion of the script elements of the Christmas season, St. Nicholas Day and the corporate Christmas party. The third chapter provides an analysis of the official and latent layers of meaning of corporate Christmas.

(6) The sixth part serves to place my research results into the Habermasian theoretical framework and to underline the study's main academic contributions. An account of research limitations and potential future research avenues concludes the thesis.

The target audience of my dissertation are, in the first place, Hungarian university teachers and researchers in the field of human resource management, and in the second place, the international scientific community engaged in critical management studies. This is the result of a conscious decision, in line with the emancipatory nature of critical theories. Above all, it is the Hungarian management research community that I would like to start a dialogue with, and it is, primarily, Hungarian management education that I would like to contribute to by making accessible in Hungarian the knowledge that is available to the students of Anglo-Saxon business schools in their native language. I am aware of no publication in Hungarian that provides a summary of critical management studies and critical human resource management, along with relevant research avenues. Another objective of my thesis is to elaborate the Habermasian approach to human resource management, and to apply it in an empirical research. Only a very few of the studies building upon critical and Habermasian approaches engage in empirical research, therefore the empirical exploration of the system of relationships between system and lifeworld in an organizational setting might well constitute an important contribution to the international literature, as well.

Part I: The Critical Paradigm in Organizational Research

I.1. Critical Management Studies

It is critical management studies that constitutes the broader management science and organization theory background of my research topic. Its appearance as an academic discipline (that is: its institutionalization) is usually associated with the publication of the book *Critical Management Studies* by Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott in (1992), even though it was actually preceded by a large number of publications and research activities relevant to the topic (see (Alvesson, Bridgman, and Willmott 2009; Hancock 2008).

The first chapter of my dissertation features a brief introduction to the rather diverse field of critical management studies, and I will also try to point out the similarities and differences between the various approaches. One of the reasons behind this diversity of critical management is the relatively broad range of sociological and philosophy of science related theories that these works gained inspiration from. Critical management studies (hereinafter CMS) is an umbrella concept encompassing all the critical realist, feminist, post-modernist, post-structuralist and post-colonialist trends, labor process theory, deconstructionism, environmentalism and, of course, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Alvesson and Willmott 2003a; Duberley and Johnson 2009; Fournier and Grey 2000). Their common starting point is that there is something wrong with management (Fournier and Grey 2000). **The purpose of CMS is to substantiate the critical reflection on the socio-philosophical foundations and the key topics of management theories, and to also contribute to the re-thinking, to the development of management theories and practices** (Alvesson and Willmott 2003a).

I am now going to review, in a step-by-step fashion, the scientific (and practical) mission of critical management studies, along with those major characteristics of this exceptionally diverse set of theories that still make them logically belong together.

- First, I am going to discuss the meaning of **management**, which is the central subject of CMS' critique.
- Next comes a review of the historical process that, through the development and propagation of **management theories**, lead to the emergence of critical voices.
- Lastly, I am going to give an account of the substantial features that make **critical management theories** indeed critical.

(1) Parker (2002) gave a threefold definition for **management**. Management can be interpreted (1) as a noun: a group of leaders managing an industrial enterprise; (2) as a verb: the process of the act of managing, ability to generate ideas, to handle matters, etc.; and (3) as an academic field that is concerned with the topics of leadership and organization, and that is also present in educational institutions (Parker 2002). Alvesson and Willmott (1996) pointed out that management is typically interpreted as a technical function: management is a distinguished element of any complex system, and this function should best be left to experts. Drawing from Child (1969, In: Alvesson and Willmott 1996) and Hales (1993, In: Alvesson and Willmott 1996), they also underlined that management must not be separated from the social situation in which it had evolved, and that it must not be considered a mere neutral technical activity: the role of management is to maintain, develop and control various forms of work organizations, which act to conserve existing inequalities in the distribution of socio-economic power in the private sphere just as well as in the public sphere.

Based on the social and historical embeddedness of management, Parker (2002) set out to explore why management is regarded as *the* path of development in Western societies, why our attitudes are positive in that respect; that is: the ideological background of management. He regards management as a new civilization process, and as a new civil religion, as well. In Western societies, development means, as a matter of fact, the ambition to bring and hold the natural world – and human nature – under the closest possible form of conscious human control. In light of this effort of society, management appears to be the most suitable instrument of all. That is why the appearance of conscious planning, and of coordination and control strategies (that is: the appearance of management itself) is interpreted as part of the development process. Moreover, in comparison to the control techniques of earlier ages, management is considered more democratic and transparent, and hence to comply with the (Western) values of the modern age. (Parker 2002)

In short, the ideological meaning of modern social development is: overcoming chaos and disorder through the application of management tools in organizations (Parker 2002). As already reflected in the early arguments of Saint-Simon, the tools of organizational management are historically interwoven with the exercise of power over things: organizations need to be governed by scientific principles – with human will having the

least possible influence –, which scientific principles are then again elaborated by management sciences (Wollin, 1961 In: Reed 1999).

(2) Now we have reached the second stage, the discussion of **management theories**, that is, the scientific foundations of management. The generally accepted fundamental purpose of management sciences is to contribute, on scientific grounds, to the improvement of management tools, and to making management better (more efficient, more effective). From this point of view, managers are the bearers of rationality, and the scientific production of knowledge needs to support managers in their effort to act even more rationally (Alvesson and Willmott 2003a) – which idea actually reflects the ideology Parker (2002) referred to as a new civil religion. This, however, results in knowledge *about* management turning into knowledge *for* management, that is, management sciences generate a one-sided, apparently neutral and technological type of knowledge that is in fact heavily infected by political content. Management theories build upon the (questionable) assumption that managers act in the common interest of workers, employees and consumers, which provides the legitimation for both management and management sciences (Alvesson and Willmott 2003a).

Next, we will concentrate on how the critical trend opposing the abovementioned purpose of mainstream management theories has evolved. It is this focus on management history that will facilitate our understanding of the critique's subject and the background of the evolution of critical trends. The evaluation of historical embeddedness is, in any case, an important aspect in critical research – according to which our theories, as possible interpretations of the world, are in fact socio-historical constructs –, and after all, this dissertation is supposed to reflect a critical point of view. Fournier and Grey (2000) give a great summary of the birth of CMS as an academic field in Britain³, along with a history of management theories. In order to analyze the historical conditions of the evolution of CMS, it is essential to look at the institutionalization process of management sciences and British business schools – the topic of the following section.

Management as a social activity found its way into academic discourse around the late 1700s and early 1800s. According to Fournier and Grey (2000), a certain kind of critical attitude towards managers' role has always been present; the potential risks of managers'

³ Basically, the United Kingdom is what one might consider the intellectual homeland of CMS, though the field has become rather international by now, and a number of other countries boast some prominent advocates of CMS, as well (Hancock, 2008)

opportunism was pointed out by no one less than Adam Smith: „The directors of [joint-stock] companies, (...)cannot well be expected that they should watch over it with the same anxious vigilance (...).” (Smith, 1776/1904:233, In: Fournier and Grey 2000, 9), which we might regard as an early formulation of the principal-agent problem. The authors identified **three important historical trends** in relation to the development of management sciences in the United Kingdom **that had contributed to the flourishing of CMS**.

The first such event of historical importance was the emergence of **the New Right**, who advocated the managerialization of the public sector, thereby contributing to the limitless growth of managerial power. Managers were firmly believed to have a privileged knowledge of the real world. Accordingly, the prevalence of the principles of efficiency and accountability in the public sector was considered highly desirable, and thus worthy of government support. At the same time, however, many began to regard management not only as the answer to leadership questions, but as the source of the problems, as well. (Fournier and Grey 2000)

Another one of the historical conditions of CMS's gaining ground was the **unsatisfactory scientific knowledge base and validity of management as a practice**. Fournier and Grey (2000) noted that this lack of legitimation was more of a problem for university teachers and researchers rather than managers themselves. The cause of which is, in my opinion, a difference in these two social groups' need for legitimation. Managers' basis for legitimation is profitability (effectiveness without the requirement of a causal explanation), while the basis for legitimation of the academic world resides in well-founded scientific reasoning (the causal explanation of effectiveness). Even though there have been a number of attempts to lay the scientific foundations for management using mathematical and statistical methods – what is more, some scientists even argue that management already operates as what Kuhn dubbed a normal science (Donaldson 2005) –, even these works have failed to answer the highly problematic question of whether profit generation is a common social interest, and whether it really leads to social wellbeing.

The third of the historical conditions of possibility for CMS was the **position of business schools** in the United Kingdom (for details see (Fournier and Grey 2000), and that social sciences **were less dominated by the positivist approach** in the United Kingdom than in the United States. Therefore this social science background provided a fertile ground

for CMS. A further impetus was that due to the New Right, social scientists, the majority of whom favored leftist ideas, kept joining the various business schools because funding for their researches was way more abundant there (Fournier and Grey 2000). Additionally, the unfolding critical trend in management sciences – thanks to its strong foundations in philosophy and sociological theory – was capable of providing business schools' researchers with the scientific basis for legitimation they had been lacking, and thus having them admitted to the academic sphere (Grey and Willmott 2005).

(3) **Critical management studies** as a trend is committed to the problematization of managers' practices and knowledge, and argues in favor of enhancing the scope of interest of management sciences with the critical perspective (Alvesson and Willmott 2003a).

Fournier and Grey (2000) concluded that there is no single appropriate method for differentiating between critical and non-critical schools. It is a hard distinction to make, if for nothing else than for critical scrutiny being an obvious requirement in the academic world, in which sense critical management studies should be considered an empty concept (Alvesson, Bridgman, and Willmott 2009) – a misconception that I have often encountered myself in my work. Therefore what follows is a summary of the attempts made to clarify what exactly *critical* means in this expression, what the critique is formulated against, and where its intellectual origins lie.

According to the representatives of CMS, mainstream management research and publications are generating an image of employees and consumers becoming more and more compliant and controllable. Management is far too potent, possibly even destructive in effect (Alvesson and Willmott 2003a), because it has gained too much influence over our everyday lives, crowding out any and all forms of spontaneity (Hancock and Tyler 2004). In terms of social significance, the corporation has eclipsed the state, the family and local and moral communities: it provides a personal identity, structures one's time, influences education and scientific practice; businesses' advertising activities reinforce social gender stereotypes, problematize identities and obscure people's self-esteem (Deetz 2003). Management's dominant theoretical approaches and their actual realization often prioritize the interest of the social elite, and thus harm the underprivileged groups of society. Therefore CMS denies the mainstream view that organizations and management are a rational means of social coordination by themselves, and underlines their role in promoting repression and an elite-ideology (managerialism) instead (Alvesson,

Bridgman, and Willmott 2009). Naturally enough, managerialism is not only present in large organizations, and not every organization is managerialist, either (Parker 2002). The problem is, rather, that „Words like coordination, co-operation, barter, participation, collectivity, democracy, community, citizenship, exchange (...) have been increasingly erased, marginalized or co-opted by the three sense of management.” (Parker 2002, 11). Summarizing the above, the critique is directed against, on the one hand, the practice of management and organizations – that is: managerialism – which has the ability to totalize social life. On the other hand, it is also aimed at management studies, which are becoming the potential servants of management, are built upon positivist philosophy of science principles, and surmise the existence of objective knowledge.

I.1.1. De-naturalization, anti-performativity and reflexivity in critical management studies

According to Fournier and Grey (2000), critical management studies are centered around **three major concepts**, namely

- de-naturalization,
- anti-performativity, and
- reflexivity.

Let us briefly review what these expressions stand for.

De-naturalization questions the naturalness of taken-for-granted social and organizational conditions. It strives to reveal the constructed nature of the power relations and organizing principles – e.g. hierarchy, greed, competitiveness – that act to preserve the social status quo and serve the interests of the now privileged groups (Alvesson, Bridgman, and Willmott 2009; Fournier and Grey 2000). CMS aims to shed light upon the creative role that management has in the shaping of privileged interests, hidden social values and norms and power relations; and also, to explore the hidden structures of repression (Duberley and Johnson 2009). Social relations believed to be natural are usually indicated by sentences of the type „This is the way it is. There is no other possibility.” – these are the assertions CMS sets out to challenge (Alvesson, Bridgman, and Willmott 2009). The different trends in CMS share a suspicion about the objectivity and neutrality of scientific findings (Willmott 2005). They all agree that all knowledge is socially constructed knowledge (Duberley and Johnson 2009), thus the links between knowledge production and power are a topic of special focus, especially in studies following Foucault's line of thought.

The opposition to *performativity* originates in the questioning of the capitalist socio-economic system's basis for legitimation. This performance principle based social order does nothing else but produce a new meritocracy (Parker 2002). The mainstream management theories embedded into society's present order basically produce knowledge that contributes to the maximization of production efficiency or, to put it another way, they interpret knowledge within the framework of a means-end calculation. CMS criticize technical/instrumental reasoning, and deny the primacy of efficiency in organizations. In modern societies, according to the critical theorists, the dominant criterion of rationality is that of instrumentalism, which shifts the evaluation of the rationality of our actions into a sphere that is morally neutral (Habermas 1994a). This way of thinking ignores the political dimension of scientific and managerial activities, which leads to a blindness towards power and morality. The hegemony of instrumental thinking in the organizational world brings about a number of pathological symptoms of the social and socio-psychological type. For instance: the ethical problems arising from the instrumentalization of mankind and nature (Habermas 1994a), environmental problems, gender problems, working under inhuman psychic and / or physical conditions. Critical theory defines these problems as unnecessary suffering, which concept is going to be discussed in more detail later on. Thus anti-performativity can, to a certain extent, be interpreted as a special case of de-naturalization, which urges the questioning of the instrumental social relationships that are regarded as a given (Alvesson, Bridgman, and Willmott 2009). CMS emphasize the accountability of science, in order to prevent science from acting as a servant of management. Of course, CMS do not oppose efficiency on merely theoretical grounds, but rather object to efficiency becoming the one and only purpose. Efficiency can actually be interpreted in this frame of thinking, as well, yet its meaning is different: achieving a purpose in an efficient way can only be important if the purpose in question is morally right, e.g. to create – in a moral sense – a better world or to put an end to exploitation (Fournier and Grey 2000).

Reflexivity is primarily a methodological and philosophical question, yet critical self-reflexivity may also be a vehicle for transforming the social order. Critical self-reflexivity, by which we recognize the oppressive mechanisms in an organization and our own role in maintaining them, is a means of de-naturalization (discussed above). CMS underline the importance of making mainstream management reflexive, both in theory and in practice (Fournier and Grey 2000). For management theories generally operate as

normal sciences (Willmott 2005), and fail to account for their philosophy of science background, their basic methodological assumptions and the alternatives to those, and thus they do not explicitly express their positivist nature.

The characterization presented above had a great influence on critical management literature, but its inconsistencies also stirred some heavy debates (Alvesson, Bridgman, and Willmott 2009), the most significant of which was the treatise of Thompson (2005). This treatise was answered by Alvesson, Bridgman and Willmott (2009), who defended all major debated aspects of the taxonomy of Fournier and Grey (2000), making a proposal for improvement in one case. First of all, Thompson (2005) criticizes that there are a number of social theories based on the principles of de-naturalization and reflexivity, that these are not at all exclusive to CMS. Alvesson, Bridgman and Willmott (2009) argue, however, that in critical management studies, the meanings of de-naturalization and reflexivity have been closely tied to the intention of radical change, as both serve the purpose of emancipation, as well. Second, Thompson (2005) mentioned that the above characteristics are not necessarily central to all of the CMS streams; anti-performativity, for example, does not at all suit the principles of critical realism, which rejects any ambition for practical effect by default. Again, Alvesson, Bridgman and Willmott (2009) defend the view of Fournier and Grey (2000), calling attention to the fact that the critique is directed against the dominance of performance in a technical sense, and against the targeted practical effect being limited to efficiency only. Notwithstanding the above, they admit that the concept of performativity needs refinement. They recommend the typology developed by Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman (2009), which distinguishes between technical and critical performativity. The former stands for instrumental performance (performance in its narrow sense), while the latter one refers to emancipatory performance, the elimination of exploitation and the creation of a better world. In the discourse about management, critical performativity presumes an active and, in a sense, disruptive role, aims at achieving domination-free communication and strives for micro-emancipation (Spicer, Alvesson, and Kärreman 2009).

Beyond social critique formulated on an academic level, critical management studies can also be interpreted as a **political project** (Fournier and Grey 2000), which aims at unveiling the socially constructed, ideologically loaded power relations. This is what

reflexivity and emancipation are the vehicles for: for liberating the individual from the constraints constructed by social and organizational relations, and by their own subject – their pseudo-self (for details, see (Fromm 2002). CMS strive to find alternative ways of establishing and running organizations (Duberley and Johnson 2009), and to support silenced and moderately loud (that is: moderately able to assert their interests) social groups (Alvesson and Willmott 2003a). Critical reflexivity inspires CMS to ask questions like:

- Who has the autocratic power?
- Who is a certain social structure more advantageous for? (Alvesson and Willmott 2003a).

No agreement has been reached, however, on what sort of concrete action plan this would necessitate, as emancipation itself presumes a certain asymmetry of power that is reflected in knowledge (see the post-modernist critique of critical theory: (Willmott 2005).

I.1.2. Various Streams in Critical Management Studies

Alvesson and Willmott (2003a) argue that the largest challenge that CMS have to face now is to evaluate the ideas that the various streams, based on a diverse range of philosophical and sociological foundations, have in common, instead of exerting further efforts to distinguish between well-defined research areas in order to build legitimation and to maintain scientific rigorosity. This view concurs with my own opinion, especially given that the sometimes hostile clash of opinions in the field seems anything but fruitful to me (on the tensions within CMS see: (Hancock 2008). Fundamental criticism is an immanent part of this field of science, and even though that lends credibility to it on the one hand, it also acts to weaken that very credibility at the same time by preferring mere theorization over empirical research and the development of practical action plans.

This chapter features a concise summary of the main differences in views distinguishing the various CMS streams. I do not, however, intend to cover the entire theoretical diversity characteristic for the field. The reason is that I believe that in order to comply with my aims formulated in the introduction it is important to provide an overview of the critical paradigm and to distinguish between a couple of major theoretical streams – that is, to provide the Hungarian management science audience with a sketch map of the field. I do not think, however, that any detail beyond what is required to position the dissertation within the literature would be necessary, given that the international literature features a

number of outstanding comprehensive works on the topic (Clegg 2005; Jones 2009; Reed 2009; Andreas G. Scherer 2009; Thompson and O’Doherty 2009).

There are three major socio-philosophical theoretical streams within CMS that I deem worthy of reviewing here: critical theory, post-modernism and critical realism. After a one-by-one overview, I will also mention the disputes going on between the various streams. At last, following a short summary, I share the reasons why my dissertation proceeds along the ideas of critical theory.

1.1.2.1. Critical theory, post-modernism and critical realism

First, I provide a short glimpse into the line of organizational research that is based on **critical theory**, the stream following the traditions of the Frankfurt School. This branch of social philosophy is basically one of German influence: German moral philosophy, Hegel's dialectic, Kant's faith in autonomy and enlightenment (Alvesson and Deetz 1998; Alvesson, Bridgman, and Willmott 2009), and Marx's critique of capitalism (which was significantly surpassed by the second generation of the Frankfurt School). Kant interpreted enlightenment as our liberation from under a self-imposed guardianship, that is, the liberation from under authority and myth. Critical theory (hereinafter CT) calls attention to the fact that modernism itself has also become a myth by now (Alvesson and Deetz 1998), that new forms of domination have emerged in our modern societies. Critical organizational research looks into how the new forms of power and repression are interlinked with modern management theories and practices. Criticism is directed towards, for instance, the ideological load and the totalitarian traits of management tools: the subject of analysis is the process during which the adaptation to the requirements of mass production and mass consumption leads to the evolution of the standardized individual, tailor-made to consumer needs (Alvesson, Bridgman, and Willmott 2009).

The representatives of CT argue that even though the modernist program has derailed, the positive values born by enlightenment may still be exploited by broadening our interpretation of rationality and by raising awareness of social-historical-political constructivism (Alvesson and Deetz 1998). Its ideal is the domination-free society and workplace that is more humane, more rational and more just than the present one (Andreas G. Scherer 2009), in which the participants are able and willing to shape their own destinies (Alvesson, Bridgman, and Willmott 2009). Yet that necessitates social change: the modification of social traditions and institutions in a way that allows for people to rid themselves from dependence, submission, and repression (Andreas G. Scherer 2009). In

this process of change, CT intends intellectuals, as the bearers of critical reason, to take an active role (Alvesson and Deetz 1998). CT is characterized by a certain normative-ethical attitude in the sense that it promotes the values associated with enlightenment – liberty, equality, fraternity –, and that its criticism of the modern social order is based on these very values, as well. It does not, however, strive to formulate normative recommendations of the "best practice" kind, unlike management textbooks or Harvard Business Review; for a concrete action plan needs to be developed in a social negotiation process based on undistorted communication, mutual understanding and stakeholder involvement.

The next subchapter will provide a more detailed account of CT, yet now, a couple of introductory thoughts on **post-modernism** is what follows. Post-modern rather has roots of French origin, its most popular authors in management literature are Foucault and Derrida (panopticism and the deconstruction method tend to be the concepts most closely associated with their names). The real or presumed opposition – or at least the lack of dialogue – between the two streams may well be explained by the national and cultural opposition between Germany and France; even though near the end of his life, Foucault expressed surprisingly positive thoughts on the Frankfurt School he had just discovered (for details see: (Alvesson and Deetz 1998; Alvesson and Willmott 2003a). According to post-modern, enlightenment's program itself is wrong, and thus non-enlightened social groups are to be supported and rescued from enlightenment: the fulfilment of the human skills that are oppressed by enlightenment itself is to be facilitated (Alvesson and Deetz 1998). It has no faith in the autonomous individual – in the modern society, the humanist subject is dead (Alvesson and Deetz 1998; Alvesson, Bridgman, and Willmott 2009); intellectuals are just as defenseless against society's powers, thus they cannot function as the engine of change, either. It denies the validity of large narratives (e.g. would-be generally valid social development theories), which present history or the operation of societies as a complete, coherent system. Such grand narratives typically describe the world from one single point of view, and the knowledge they create is always loaded with power (Alvesson and Willmott 2003a). Researches into organization theory strive to deconstruct the power residing in management texts, and to formulate opposing interpretations (Alvesson and Deetz 1998), and support local practices of emancipation.

A follower of post-modern traditions is post-structuralism, which builds upon the works of Foucault (for details see: (Jones 2009)).

Lastly, I provide a brief overview of **critical realism**, which also defines its stance in theory of science in opposition to the mainstream, but still holds a sort of intermediate position between the constructivist (which is, in ontological-epistemological terms, also characteristic for post-modernism) and the positivist traditions. This stream is centered around the analysis of the institutionalized structures of power, and the understanding of the causal mechanisms that are capable of shaping the way the social world is organized and of structuring social interactions (Reed 2009). The goal is to understand and explain "how and why things happen in the way they do, rather than in other ways" (Reed 2009, 55): that is, to explore prevailing causal chains and to reveal the hidden, non-observable processes that these causal chains are generated by (Reed 2009). Thus the ontological starting point of critical realism resides in the assumption that hidden background structures and relations do have causal power and a potential to influence the phenomena occurring at the surface (Reed 2009). Nonetheless, it does admit that scientific explanations depend on the ontological postulates they are based on, and thus it sees no sense in testing any hypotheses (Reed 2009). What makes it critical is its emancipatory nature: to reveal why things in society or the workplace happen the way they happen, and how that very order serves (or violates) the interests of certain groups of society, and what sort of background power and control relationships there exist that act to maintain unequal and unjust social relations (Reed 2009). Critical realism relies on the Marxist tradition to a far greater extent than CT; it is especially Labor Process Theory (a separate approach in organization theory that was built upon, yet distinguished itself from critical realism) that uses a wide range of Marxist concepts (see (Adler 2007; Adler, Forbes, and Willmott 2007)).

1.1.2.2. Rifts in Critical Management Studies

The **controversies** within the field of CMS **originate in the differences between the sociological and philosophical approaches constituting the fundamentals of the various streams**. First of all, there is no agreement over whether organization analyses should follow an **objectivist or subjectivist ontology** (Duberley and Johnson 2009). Fournier and Grey (2000) discuss this debate as a debate on realism and relativism, even though subjectivism is not necessarily always equivalent to relativism, as it is the case

with post-modernism. There is one major rift, and hence two major camps: first, the followers of critical theory, critical realism and labor process theory, and second, the representatives of post-modernism and post-structuralism. The first camp is more fond of ontological objectivism, while the second would rather like to keep to ontological subjectivism; though admittedly, there are certain minor differences in methodological applications within these two groups, as well.

The second matter of dispute concerns the role of CMS in management education, in the emancipation of managers, that is, **whether the modernist project is reparable** or not. Fournier and Grey (2000) refer to this argument as the debate on commitment or non-commitment towards taking an active role in shaping the world of managers. The boundary, again, lies between the two abovementioned groups: those who are pro-commitment, and those who argue in favor of keeping a safe distance from all sorts of management practices.

II.1.2.2.1. Philosophy of Science Debate

Let us discuss the **philosophy of science debate** first. As already mentioned above, the various critical management trends share a common epistemological stance: there is no such thing as objective observation or value-free knowledge, scientific achievements always serve certain interests (Duberley and Johnson 2009; Willmott 2005). Concerning ontological considerations, however, they represent differing views.

The first party combines epistemological subjectivism with *ontological realism*, and assumes a dialectical type of relationship between actors and social structures. According to the followers of CT, research findings are always influenced by the researcher's subjectivity, which creates many differing variants of the social reality, which is otherwise independent of the researcher. They do accept the existence of „reality-as-it-is“ (Duberley and Johnson 2009), yet in that very form, it is regarded as unavailable for scientific inquiry. Their methodological recommendation is to substitute the positivist concept of value-free knowledge with conscious bias/partiality. The value of any research project is determined by its contribution to the emancipation project, and by how successful it is in amplifying the voice of marginalized groups. (Duberley and Johnson 2009)

Critical realists presume that the subject of the research acts independently of the researcher, yet developing an understanding of the world constitutes a social construction process. That is, the structures of social reality are objectively given and have an

influence on the actor (on their identity, their behavior), yet at the same time, social actors do also create and shape socio-economic systems (Bashkar, 1989 In: Duberley and Johnson 2009). Critical realist reasoning faces, however, serious difficulties in defending the suggested causal relationship concerning the structures' influence on the actors (Duberley and Johnson 2009). According to post-modernism, this scientific argument itself is an argument guided by a certain interest (Duberley and Johnson 2009). In response, realists express the concern that this way, all our social experience might be reduced to mere linguistic phenomena, which then again could be misleading for social sciences (Fournier and Grey 2000).

The post-modern camp, on the contrary, takes the standpoint that what we consider social reality is itself something "created", determined by our own actions and cognitions – the act of knowing creates what we will find. This stance *represents* what we call *ontological subjectivism*. They condemn critical theory for its essentialist nature: CT makes the discourse appear as if it was the result of non-discursive processes (Duberley and Johnson 2009). According to them, there is nothing to see „out there”: „you can never interrogate an event, a character, a discourse about its degree of original reality” (Baudrillard, 1993:146 In: Duberley and Johnson 2009). For post-modernists, discourse is of key importance, our world is shaped by discourses, and it can only exist in discourses – and discourse is the basic nature of both linguistic and material matters (Fournier and Grey 2000). At any time, there is a number of differing interpretations of the world on offer, therefore post-modernist science aims at supporting the emergence of a wide and diverse variety of discourses (Duberley and Johnson 2009).

Post-modernist trends are often charged with nihilism, as they completely lack all kinds of political stance, e.g. they deny that people's stories about exploitation would be any more true than the stories constructed by those in power. What is more, they argue that their apolitical standpoint is an advantage, and that relativism shields them from the grand narratives that strive for totality. Critical theory, critical realism and labor process theory simply want to replace one type of absolutism with another type. Later, the debate on political commitment took a turn: epistemological and moral relativism became two separate trends. (Fournier and Grey 2000)

II.1.2.2.2. Practical Debate: Relation to Managers

The two abovementioned camps can be distinguished on **both political and practical grounds**. Actually, the dispute concerns their relationship to practicing managers: is CMS obliged to understand, emancipate and educate managers? Does CMS have to, or is CMS allowed to engage in a dialogue with this group of society at all?

The first camp supports the pragmatic standpoint: they are *committed* to developing and supporting more humane forms of management. They take a pro-transformation stance, yet there is no agreement over how the transformation should take place (Fournier and Grey 2000). One opportunity for influencing management practices is by education: Critical Management Education (CME), based on the traditions of critical pedagogy, is a topic popular with the representatives of both CMS and critical human resource development (cf. Contu 2009; Csillag and Hidegh 2011; Fenwick 2004; Monaghan and Cervero 2006; Perriton and Reynolds 2004; Samra-Fredericks 2003). Other fields for influencing management practices include critical human resource development (Fenwick 2004), participant action research (Pataki and Vári 2011), reflective action learning (Gelei 2005) and critical action learning (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). This, however, would necessitate a far more lenient attitude towards managers, and should be built upon, instead of harsh criticism, an understanding of the world managers exist in (Fournier and Grey 2000).

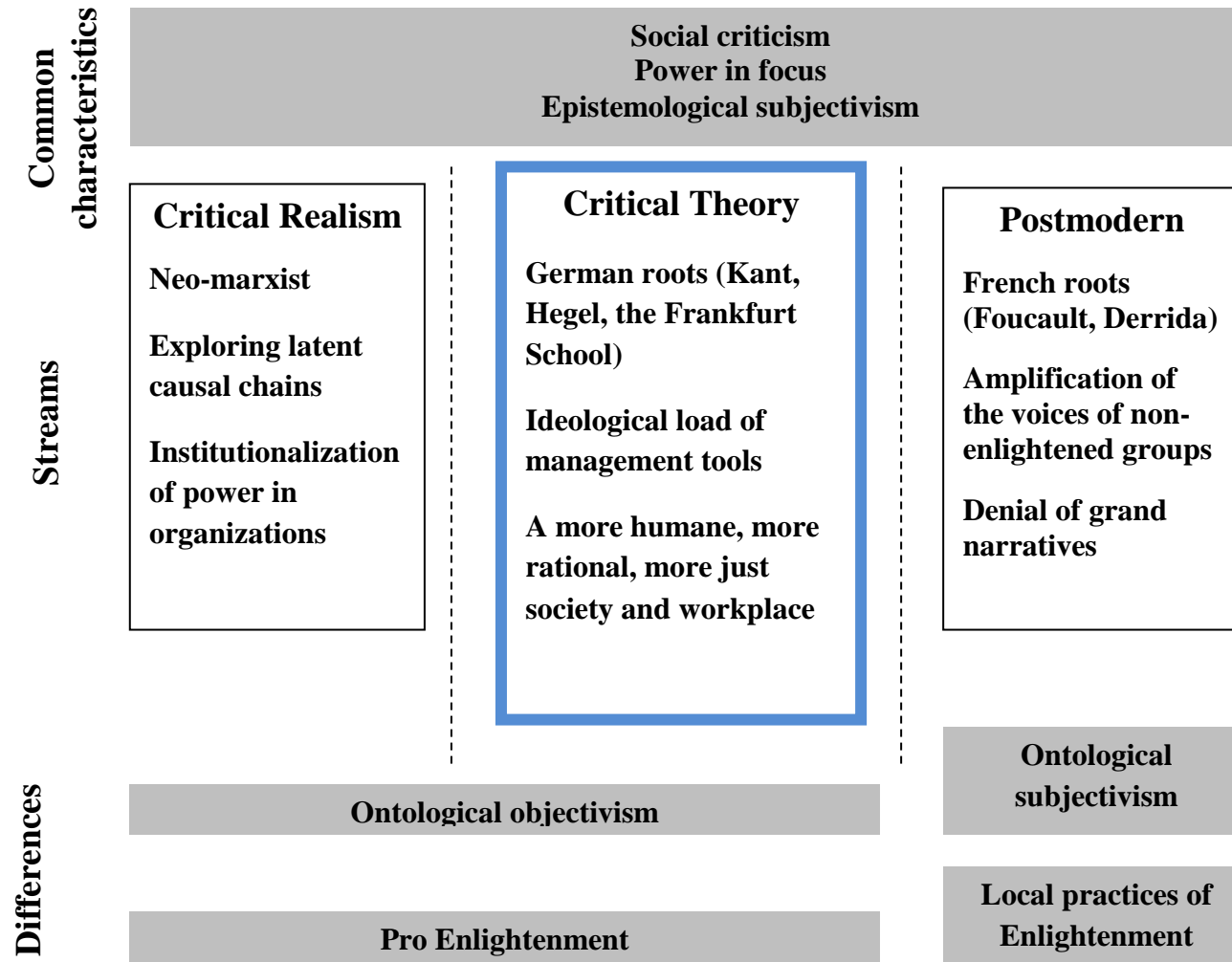
The post-modernist camp, however, prefers a sort of *intellectual elitism*. They completely rule out the possibility of any discourse sympathizing with managers, as they believe that „dialogue is the weapon of the powerful” (Burrell 1996:650 In: Fournier and Grey 2000). That is why they rather seek to undermine management practices. This stance, however, ignores the fact that managers are not a homogenous group (Fournier and Grey 2000), that different managers are characterized by differing levels of social sensitivity, self-criticism and critical attitude.

In spite of the debated questions, a socially critical attitude was clearly common to all streams of CMS (Figure 2). Alvesson (2008 In: Alvesson, Bridgman, and Willmott 2009) made another attempt to identify recurring and common topics, which he referred to as the Four I's: the critical querying of all those Ideologies, Institutions, Interests and Identities that are loaded with power, are harmful and the validity of which is hardly ever challenged by the members of the society. The vehicles of querying are negotiation, deconstruction, de-familiarization, alternative narratives and the amplification of the

voice of marginalized groups. All these serve the following purposes: provide inspiration for a social reform that serves the interests of the non-privileged; and/or to lay the foundations for the opposition against the Four I's. At the same time, Alvesson (2008 In: Alvesson, Bridgman, and Willmott 2009) also underlined that CMS should, to a certain extent, take into account the limits of workplace and social life, and that production and the provision of services constitute a legitimate purpose for corporations.

Another thing these debates tell us is that the different streams can learn from each other. Post-modernism and post-structuralism, for example, possess analytical tools the application of which is worth considering for the other camp, as well, in order to explore the modern conditions of power. Moreover, post-modernists point out that the discourse is power-laden, which then again warns the followers of CT that they must remain sensitive to and reflective about any new forms of domination potentially emerging as a result of a mutual concurrence of opinions (Alvesson and Deetz 1998). The post-modernist camp, on the other hand, might learn from critical theory in terms of social utility and practical relevance: in order to avoid becoming esoteric, it is essential to work out an action plan that is based on morally driven communicative reasoning (Alvesson and Deetz 1998).

Figure 2: Streams of Critical Management Studies



The above review of the relevant literature serves to position my research within the appropriate context. **The rest of the dissertation relies on critical theory**, and particularly on the social theory of Jürgen Habermas within. I believe this approach will give me access to a comprehensive theory – a grand narrative, if you like – that provides a framework suitable for the interpretation of the management of corporations' cultural-symbolic sphere. I do share the faith in the existence of the autonomous individual and in the ethical foundations of democracy, and also the opinion that striving for a more liberated, more equal, more just and more fraternal society and engaging in discourses on moral questions does indeed make sense. As Sayer (2000:161, In: Reed 2009) noted: „any criticism presupposes a better way of life”. I do as well share the view that there exist certain objectified – that is: institutionalized – social forces that manifest themselves as limits to autonomous individual action, possibly taking the form of ideologies or structural constraints. Instead of exploring the relevant causal chains, however, I am more interested in how these phenomena penetrate our everyday interpretive and sensemaking processes, and our everyday discourses and symbols. Thus what follows next is the discussion of critical theory.

1.2. Critical Theory

This subchapter provides an overview of the social theory background of the critical theory based stream of critical management studies. First, I will briefly introduce the Frankfurt School, which constitutes the socio-philosophical foundation of the stream, and the three most important theoretical concepts (alienation, anomie, rationalization) that the works of the School rely on. Next, I will review the major research avenues of the School, considering the works of the first and the second generations as a whole. Finally, I will turn to the social theory of Jürgen Habermas – a second-generation member of the Frankfurt School –, which is built upon two basic pairs of concepts: system / lifeworld and purposive-rational action / communicative action. This is the theory that is going to provide the conceptual framework for the critical analysis of human resource management, and for my research project, as well.

I.2.1. Birth and History of the Frankfurt School

The birth of critical theory is associated with the scientists of the Frankfurt School.⁴ The Frankfurt Institute of Social Research was founded in 1924 by Felix Weil, the son of a millionaire businessman, who, in the course of his studies, reached the conclusion that there is a great need for an independent research institute that would rely on the Marxist tradition, and that would unify the scientists of multiple disciplines (Alvesson and Willmott 1996; Andreas G. Scherer 2009; Wiggershaus 2007). The most significant members of the School were / are: Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), and Erich Fromm (1900-1980) from the first generation, and Jürgen Habermas (1929-) and Axel Honneth (1949-) of the second generation. *In 1930, Max Horkheimer became the head of the research institute, and announced a program that expressed the wish to work out a comprehensive anti-positivist social theory that combines sociology with philosophy and integrates, to a certain extent, the achievements of psychoanalysis, while providing a critical analysis of the current social order* (Wiggershaus 2007). Criticism of the current society primarily meant an anti-capitalist attitude, yet some of the analyses criticized state socialism, as well (Felkai, Gedeon, and Némedi 2003).

The School was established in the tradition of the Left-Hegelian philosophy (Alvesson and Willmott 1996), yet it failed to realize the dream of its founding patron, Felix Weil, which was the theoretical broadening of scientific Marxism by way of the research institute (Wiggershaus 2007). Their association with the Marxist tradition mainly resides in their emancipatory attitude and their focus on the fundamental problems of capitalist societies and on reification. They did not, however, share Marx's views on the proletarian revolution and on his theory of social formation (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). Their attention shifted from the proletariat to all those individuals who had become frustrated and confused by the contradictory requirements, degenerated priorities and oppressive forces of the capitalist society (Alvesson and Willmott 1996).

During the Second World War, the research institute fled to the United States. There they continued their work, now also driven by two fresh historical traumas: the brutality of Nazism and anti-Semitism, and the totality of the extremely materialist mass culture of the American consumer society. At the same time, the ever more marked shift of the

⁴ To those interested, I can recommend some outstanding, comprehensive studies (in German and English, as well as Hungarian) on the work of the Frankfurt School: Wiggershaus (2007), Alvesson and Willmott (1996), Scherer (2009), Weiss (2000).

Soviet Union towards an authoritarian social order was another cause for worry (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). In the background of their research, there was a question that reflected true astonishment: *how is it possible that ideologies built upon irrational foundations can completely black out the light of the rational mind? How exactly do the seemingly given patterns of social action – e.g. consumerism, autocracy – emerge under certain historical and social conditions?* (Willmott 2005)

After the Second World War, Adorno and Horkheimer returned to Germany, and re-founded the Frankfurt-based research institute (Andreas G. Scherer 2009; Wiggershaus 2007). During the student riots of the sixties, the works of the School also became relevant to practical action, with the *One-Dimensional Man* of Marcuse (1990) turning particularly popular (Alvesson and Willmott 1996; Andreas G. Scherer 2009). Once again, the questions whether capitalism can be superseded or not and whether there is a social base for change were brought to the foreground. Adorno and Horkheimer clearly had a despairing view of the situation, and Marcuse was not very optimistic, either: „Today we have the capacity to turn the world into hell, and we are well on the way to doing so.” – he said in one of his lectures (Marcuse 1970:62, In: Andreas G. Scherer 2009). Which was to include that we have all possible means for creating a more liberated society, yet this is not what we use them for right now. Later, Habermas also reached an odd diagnosis concerning this same question: there is a possibility that the colonization of the lifeworld by the system will lead to social erosion and opposition of a degree that will allow for the emergence of a more democratic society (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). We do not, however, have any sort of metaphysical guarantee, he added, that what will overcome social opposition will not be yet another wave of technocratization (Alvesson and Willmott 1996).

1.2.2. The Three Major Sociological Pillars of Critical Theory

Criticism of the modern capitalist society as a topic is not new to sociology; apart from Marx, the two other great fathers of sociology, Durkheim and Weber did also look into the problems of capitalism (Alvesson, Bridgman, and Willmott 2009). CT relies on these works to a great extent. Below, I will introduce three key concepts that are also part of Habermas's system and lifeworld theory, which my critical analysis of corporate Christmas will be built upon: Marx's (1818-1883) concept of **alienation**, Durkheim's (1858-1917) concept of **anomie** and Weber's (1864-1920) theory on **formal rationalization**.

In his analyses of capitalist societies, *Karl Marx* concentrated on the situation of the proletariat as an oppressed, exploited layer of society. He disputed the commodity nature of labor (Marx 1977), and asserted that one of the consequences of treating labor as a commodity is the **exploitation** of workers by capitalists. He used this ethically loaded expression to denote the conflictual nature of the capitalist-worker relationship, and to point out that workers had no control over the use of the value added they had produced (Adler 2009). Another consequence of labor having become a commodity was the phenomena of **alienation**. Marx mentioned four forms of alienation: the alienation of the worker from the product of his own work, that of the worker from himself / herself as a species-being, the alienation of people from each other, and alienation resulting from religion⁵ (Marx 1977). Beyond the specific meaning of each different form, there is a general characteristic: the source of alienation is always an alien power that is believed to be natural and given, and that had been constructed by humankind yet became independent from him/her with time. In capitalist societies, it is money, as an ex-post coordination mechanism that has become impersonal, that constitutes this alien power. Alienation is always accompanied by the reversal of the purpose-instrument relationship: „each purpose becomes an instrument and each instrument becomes a purpose” (Fehér and Heller 2002, 34).

In capitalist societies, the starting point of the alienation process is alienated labor. According to Marx, humankind is a species-being, who „looks upon himself as a universal and therefore free being.” (Marx 1977, 3:49) The species-being nature manifests itself in, on the one hand, humankind being a natural being, who is capable of processing natural goods and objects in order to subsist. On the other hand, however, man's species-being nature also means that his/her work is a free and conscious life activity, „man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness.” (Marx 1977, 3:50). Thus work is not only a means of his/her subsistence, but through his work, in the process of objectification and its reversal, humankind actually creates him/herself: humankind is in fact a result of his/her own work. (Fehér and Heller 2002)

Under capitalist conditions, however, labor is rid of its free and conscious activity nature. The worker has no disposal over the produce of his/her work, he/she does not produce for the satisfaction of his/her own needs, but for the capitalist. Through his/her work, he/she

⁵ This last form of alienation (that resulting from religion) will not be discussed in my thesis.

creates a materialized world that is alien to him/her, he/she puts his/her self into objects, he/she becomes objectified. Yet because the product his/her work results in is not his/her own, and because he/she does not pursue his/her activities according to his/her own needs, this objectification cannot be extinguished: „...so is the worker’s activity not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.” (Marx 1977, 3:48) As it is not the worker who has disposal over the product – that disposal is substituted by wage –, but the capitalist, the product turns into an alien power independent from the worker: the worker becomes alienated from his/her own work. And given that free and conscious work is what constitutes the species-being nature of humankind, this process results in the worker becoming alienated from him/herself, as well.

The self-alienation of the manufacturing man/woman, then again, is basically equivalent to his/her alienation from his/her fellow men/women: the reification of personal relationships. „The devaluation of the world of men is in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things.” (Marx 1977, 3:45) At the climax of alienation, true community ceases to exist, and the commodity-relation becomes the only pseudo-community (Fehér and Heller 2002). In the economy, the personal relationships between people turn into objective relations, that is, people interact with each other through the exchange of commodities. „The social status of individuals, their standard of living, the satisfaction of their needs, their freedom, and their power are all determined by the value of their commodities.” – Marcuse adds (1982, 314).

Marx's ultimate conclusion was that as long as the alienated form of labor is not abolished, advancement will not serve people's happiness and liberation, but will only be of a technical character, and will only reveal ever more rational modes of the domination of humankind and nature (Marcuse 1982). While Marx was interested in the objective, material bearings of alienation, *the Frankfurt School rather emphasizes the socio-psychological effects of alienation*. Fromm, for example, coined the term pseudo-self for the social self that expresses the individual's self-submission to social, economic or transcendent powers – that is: their self-alienation (Fromm 2002).

The most recent sociological interpretations attribute similar meanings to the concepts of alienation and anomie (Andorka 2000), yet first, let us get acquainted with the original interpretation of **anomie** by *Émile Durkheim*. Theories of anomie belong to the family of the theories of deviance, their specific characteristic being that it is not individual or group

attributes that they explain the frequency of deviant behavior with, but the structure and the contradictions of the macro-society, assuming that the roots of deviant behavior are common, present throughout the entire society (Andorka 2000). The concept was introduced by Durkheim in his work *Suicide* (Durkheim 2000), in which he established that large-scale and rapid social changes – including both recession and sudden economic growth – are accompanied by significant surges in the number of suicides. Durkheim drew the conclusion that the phenomenon results from the weakening of public morals, and from the loss of social norms' ability to constrain individual desires and passions (Durkheim 2000). The healthy functioning of a society necessitates a certain degree of accord on norms, thus if this accord happens to deteriorate, the frequency of social problems – disturbances in socialization, norms and values – increases (Andorka 2000). This unregulated state characterized by a growing level of social discontent is what Durkheim called a state of anomie.

Durkheim found that industry and commerce are struck by chronic anomie, which he traced back to the weakening of the forces – religion and the state, namely – that had used to constrain industry and commerce previously: „...industry, instead of being still regarded as a means to an end transcending itself, has become the supreme end of individuals and societies alike." (Durkheim 2000, 278). Thus Durkheim – just like Marx – also problematized the reversal of the purpose-instrument relationship. According to Durkheim, however, the problem is that, through the social acceptance of perpetual discontent, our needs' and desires' having become limitless turned crisis and anomie into a state considered normal. He, much unlike Marx, drew the conclusion that it is employers and wealthy people who are struck by this condition most.

Third, we take a look at *Max Weber's* theory of formal **rationality**. Weber mostly regarded rationalization as a favorable process, which according to him meant „the elimination of magic from the world” (Kieser 1995b). Notwithstanding the above, he did see the two-facedness of the process, as well: the dangerous tendencies of rationalization he had shed light upon later received special attention from the Frankfurt School, as well. According to Weber, modern-age rationalization takes place on three levels: that of worldviews, institutions and the practical aspects of life (Kieser 1995b). He presented the summary of his thoughts on the rationalization of worldviews and belief systems, the climax of which he saw in Calvinism, in his work titled *The Protestant Ethic*

and the Spirit of Capitalism. With the development of society, the relationship of man to religion has changed, as a result of which religious ethic has lost in power (Kieser 1995b). The function of worldviews was to explain unjustly suffered pains and offences, and it was this explanatory power that has been weakened by the changes. With the abolishment of the institution of confession, the protestant man/woman is left with him/herself, and because of the predestination doctrine, people have to work ascetically and successfully in order to prove that they are among the chosen ones (Kieser 1995b). It was this attitude, according to Weber, that opened the gates to professionalized work and the concentration of capital (money was not to be spent on worldly pleasures) (Kieser 1995b). The researchers of the Frankfurt School, consequently, were already faced with a modern society in which, lacking a metaphysical explanation, wrongfully suffered harms could only be attributed to mankind itself. Therefore responsible social theory set the goal of revealing the social mechanisms beyond unnecessary suffering, and hence contributing to its abolishment.

Rationalization on the institutional level and the rationalization of worldviews happen simultaneously, which means that natural and social problems are becoming more and more controllable and predictable by the means of science, technology and organizations (Kieser 1995b). As stated in our discussion of the conceptual definition of management in the previous subchapter, the function of management is to ensure that this very control is in place; thus management is the major driving force of modern rationalization. While referred to by Parker (2002) as the religion of the modern age, management was, ironically, associated with the process of religion losing ground in Weber's eyes. This apparent contradiction shows that a new ideology was born, which, though almost completely lacking any transcendental content, still features an almighty actor: its role is taken by the enlightened man (the expert). The most rational way to organize social control is bureaucracy.⁶

According to Weber, the individual is getting more and more methodical and consistent in controlling their lifestyle according to their own values, their own free will (also see Weber's concepts of purpose rationality and value rationality) (Kieser 1995b). The contradictions of rationalization become apparent at the level of the practical aspects of life: institutions turn into an iron cage, their existence becomes a goal in and of itself, whereas they should serve society as a means of attaining its goals instead (Kieser 1995b).

⁶ For a detailed characterization see: Kieser, 1995a.

As Weber formulated the contradictions of instrumental thinking: „...a purely technical value (...) becomes viewed [by the bureaucratic officials] as the ultimate and single value” (Weber 1972: 835, In: Kieser 1995b). This realization drives scientific attention towards the formulation of alternative rationality interpretations – in the third chapter, I will review the rationality concepts of Habermas (partly built upon those of Weber).

All three sociologists mentioned above viewed the contradictory relationship between goals and instruments as a problem: Marx, Durkheim and Weber used the concepts alienation, anomie and rationalization, respectively, to capture the essence of the issue. As it will be apparent from what follows, the question of how the administrative world and money as alien powers restrict individual freedom has always been a focus topic of critical theory, as well.

1.2.3. Dominant Trains of Thought in Critical Theory

The members of the Frankfurt School did share a sort of disappointment in the promise of **enlightenment**. In his analysis of the socio-psychological effects of enlightenment in his work titled *Escape from Freedom* (2002), Erich Fromm elaborated on, and what is more, by focusing on the concepts of **negative** and **positive freedom**⁷, also re-interpreted Weber's essay on protestant ethic. Fromm regarded the rationalization process described by Weber as the climax of negative freedom, which leads to the emergence of the conformist individual, who consider themselves an instrument for achieving economic goals. Fromm coined the term pseudo-self to refer to this social self, which expresses the individual's self-submission to social, economic or transcendent powers – that is: their self-alienation.

It also follows from the analysis of Fromm, that the condition of freedom that remains unfulfilled is exactly the one that, according to Weber, the rationalization of our lifestyle relies upon: the individual does not make his decisions according to their own values, but under the influence of external forces. By labor having its meaning narrowed down to being a commodity only, „... the emphasis (...) shifts from the present satisfaction of

⁷ Negative freedom is freedom from something, which focuses on one's room for action, and concentrates on the rights of freedom, on opportunities. It means the freedom from instincts, from the patterns of action determined by the inherited structures of the nervous system, the disposal of the need to adapt to nature, which, at the same time, constitutes the first stage of individuation, as well.

Positive freedom is freedom for something, that is, the freedom to actually perform some potential action. Fromm emphasized its self-governance aspect, which refers to one's spontaneous cognitive processes, to the ability to capitalize on one's goals, emotions and on one's own will. (Fromm 2002)

creative activity to the value of the finished product. Thereby man misses the only satisfaction that can give him real happiness – the experience of the activity of the present moment.” (Fromm 2002, 181) The opposite of conformism is spontaneity, the main characteristic of which is that the primary purpose of the individual's action, manifesting itself in the free, creative activity of the self, is self-expression, which then again is the key to positive freedom. The two elements of spontaneity are love and creative work, for which, unfortunately, there is hardly any room left in modern capitalist societies (for more, see (Fromm 2008).

In contrast to enlightenment, Habermas formulated his criticism on the level of social institutions: in his eyes, **modernism is an unfinished program** (Alvesson and Deetz 1998), as its goals – namely, to liberate man from fear and to create his sovereignty (Horkheimer and Adorno 2011) – have not yet been achieved. The reason is that enlightenment has been realized in a one-sided fashion, concentrating on the instrumental mind only (Andreas G. Scherer 2009), and hence ignoring some fundamental ethical and political questions (Willmott 2005). Consequently, the program of enlightenment acted to create new forms of dogmas, dependencies and deprivation (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). As of now, rationalization is stuck halfway in the process of realization, which we may only be able to overcome by means of our critical mind.

The association between **science** and the interest that serves man's liberation from fear has severely deteriorated. Science is not the benevolent actor of enlightenment any more, it has developed close ties with the economic and administrative powers that serve the purpose of instrumental rationalization (Willmott 2005). The notion of a science capable of generating knowledge that is value-free and objective, which has pervaded the entire field of positivist social sciences, is based on Weber's ideas. Weber did, nonetheless, recognize the two-facedness of science: science **might be a driving force of emancipation, just as well as dehumanization**. In order to prevent abuse, he suggested that values be banished: science merely delivers the means for achieving the goals set by the members (leaders) of society. The most telling example from the field of management studies is Taylor's theory of scientific management, which was meant to dispel irrationality from the field of management, on the basis of technocratic principles. (Alvesson and Willmott 1996)

CT however suggests that **value-free science is impossible to exist** at all, as the methodology of scientific research is always constructed under a given constellation of

historical and cultural conditions (Andreas G. Scherer 2009). Scientific activities are always driven by certain interests, therefore it does not make sense to systematically exclude the normative-ethical dimension (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). Positivism, which promotes the methodology applied by natural sciences, is bound to fail with respect to social sciences because while the reproduction of natural phenomena is independent from our understanding, social phenomena are generated through social construction, and can only be interpreted in a subjective way (Andreas G. Scherer 2009). Habermas identified three **knowledge-constitutive interests**: technical, practical and emancipatory interest (Willmott 2005). The first type is characteristic for empirical-analytical sciences (e.g. functionalist organization theories), the second for historical-hermeneutic sciences (e.g. interpretive organization theories), while the third one is what guides critical sciences (e.g. critical management studies). (Willmott 2005)

CT urges the **extension of the rationality concept** that dominates positivist sciences. Apparently, the only thing that enlightenment brought for modern society to replace religious dogmas were some new beliefs: science guarantees development, the market guarantees freedom and efficiency, consumption is the path to happiness, experts are the ones who perform best in their profession (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). Our one-dimensional society that we built upon the myth of rationality operates, as a matter of fact, in an irrational way, and leads to the death of the autonomous individual (Marcuse 1990). Because of the one-sided, instrumental concept of rationality, it is the choice of the instrument what is considered important in our analyses of social processes, while the purposes are regarded to be given and morally neutral (Andreas G. Scherer 2009). CT does not only have to **uncover the social pathologies resulting from one-sided rationalization** (Habermas, 1985, In: Alvesson and Willmott 1996), but it should also develop an alternative concept of rationality, which requirement will be fulfilled by the communicative rationality concept of Habermas (see later).

The most important moral objective of CT is the abolishment of the **unnecessary suffering** present in modern societies, which is caused by the halfway-stuck rationalization process, and which cannot be justified by the present level of structural and technical development (Felkai, Gedeon, and Némedi 2003; Willmott 2005). The term unnecessary suffering primarily denotes the psychic burden and the repression found in industrially developed capitalist societies (Felkai, Gedeon, and Némedi 2003). In an organizational setting, unnecessary suffering is caused by stress and workaholism or the

discrimination against various social groups. For example, according to the findings concerning the balance of work / private life of a qualitative survey among Hungarian managers, young, financially well-off managers reported purposelessness, the senselessness of their work, severe work-life balance problems and a significant amount of overwork (Bokor and Radácsi 2006). This example of young managers also sheds light upon the difference between CT and orthodox Marxism: managers do not belong to the exploiters, they are among those oppressed by the totality of the system themselves (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). It must be noted, however, that even though each and every consumer and worker contributes to the maintenance and the formation of the system, managers' responsibility is still prominent because of the scope of their decisions. CT calls attention to the fact that following the profit imperative is just as much a moral choice as is the application of the principle of rightfulness in the compensation scheme. They believe unnecessary suffering to be caused by the aforementioned social problems: the absolute rule of technical rationality and instrumental thinking, reification, the commodification and the commercialization of everyday life, and freedom becoming a myth instead of being realized. In capitalist societies, the individual is socialized to become an obedient employee and consumer, incapable of reflection and of envisaging any sort of alternative (Marcuse 1990). Education, the media and social norms function as a control mechanism to ensure that each member of the society perfectly adapts to their expected role, both as a consumer and as a worker (Andreas G. Scherer 2009). Though the capitalist society is built upon the myth of mass consumption, of the satisfaction of needs, it is, paradoxically, incapable of satisfying true human needs (Alvesson and Willmott 1996).

According to CT, the key to social development is the protection and the realization of **democracy** and the extension of **autonomy**, yet in a way that supersedes the concepts and practices of empowerment and participation. Which does not mean that technical development in itself should be condemned, the goal is rather to eliminate the risks of its one-sidedness. CT assumes that a more autonomous form of individual existence is possible (Alvesson and Willmott 2003a), where individuals are able to make informed value judgements and decisions that are not hindered by unnecessary dependencies resulting from inequalities in wealth, power and knowledge (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). Today's democracy is, however, vulnerable, therefore it needs to be protected from destructive social mechanisms (Habermas 1981). Democratic institutions remain an

empty shell without democratic culture, thus it is this latter one the utmost importance of which Habermas strives to emphasize.

The most important means of emancipation is **critical reflection**, which allows of our liberation from the suffering that originates in our disturbed thinking and our oppressive social relations. Critical (self-)reflection presumes a certain alertness for discovering the relationships between the construction and the representation of reality, and the institutionalized exercise of power (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). Habermas (1975 In: Alvesson and Willmott 1996) differentiates between two types of critical reflection. The first variant is concerned with the world of ideas, the purpose is to release and re-construct the ideologically frozen dependency relationships, yet a concrete link with transformation does not necessarily exist. The other type of critical reflection, however, does include and, at the same time, also supersede what we call rational re-construction, and aims at melting the destructive habits of the mind that restrict the patterns of perception and action, and thus, in the end, lead to changes in our actions. (Alvesson and Willmott 1996) For critical management education purposes, Reynolds (1999) attempted to provide a summary of the principles of critical reflection, which incorporates both types:

- Commitment to the querying of presumptions and all things taken for natural, both in theory and in practice.
- A focus on the ideological and power relations hidden in the social structure, in social processes and in practice: to uncover, to raise awareness of and to finally eliminate inequalities related to race, social gender and class, and age.
- An attitude that is social rather than individual: emphasis on the social nature of individual experiences.
- Ultimately, the goal is to create a more just society that is based on fair treatment and democracy.

Of course, these principles should not only be followed in management education, but they can also constitute a cornerstone of critical human resource development programs or everyday workplace and managerial decisions.

After this concise overview of CT, I will now switch to the social theory of Jürgen Habermas, a second-generation member of the Frankfurt School.

1.2.4 The Social Theory of Habermas

Jürgen Habermas is generally considered the last of the modern social scientists. The purpose of his work is to call attention to the vulnerability of democracy and to urge the

reparation of the modernist program through the protection of universal ethical norms and values (Burrell 1994; Clegg 2005). Habermas acts both as a philosopher and a sociologist, which constitutes the strength of his theoretical work – but its weaknesses, as well (Burrell 1994). He strives to reach a wider audience: he writes newspaper articles, gives interviews, comments on current political issues, and thus he has dealt the last blow to the idea of the value-free scientist.

Habermas was extremely serious about the program for developing an interdisciplinary social theory, which the first generation of the Frankfurt School, in his opinion, failed to accomplish (Wiggershaus 2007). By developing his social theory, he aimed at creating the rational base that critical theory had been lacking previously, and at making it advance from abstract moralization to creating the rational foundations of the normative standards of communication (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). Habermas turned away from Marxist materialism, as well, and built his social theory on a phenomenological fundament (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). His social criticism is primarily aimed at two accompanying phenomena of modernism: rationalization and reification, which lead to the dominance of science, technology, administration and experts over the lifeworld of the citizenry (Alvesson and Willmott 1996).

His theoretical apparatus is extraordinarily complicated, yet in fact, it is the following simple questions that reside in the background (Burrell 1994):

- **How can we make decisions on our actions in a world where traditional myths have lost their power both in ethical and in political terms, and where the approaches suggested by our common sense striving to resolve the conflicts are undermined by administrative and market structures?**
- **How can we save democracy, if it seems to be an unsustainable idea?**
- **How can we create the conditions of democratic participation in our everyday lives?**

The work of Habermas was inspiring for the field of **organization theories**, as well; Burrell (1994) mentioned four of his pieces as particularly relevant: *Knowledge and Human Interests* (2005), *Modernity versus Postmodernity* (1981), *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1998). As early as 1983, Cooper already argued that the methodological individualism of functionalist organization theories did not provide a sufficient range of tools for organizational researchers, for ignoring the dialectics of social life necessarily leads to

alienated research practices and, ultimately, to alienated organizations. According to Cooper (1983), the purpose of organization sciences is to identify the limits of the rational model that behavioral models (behaviorism) are built upon. He points out that we should devote more attention to the deeper structures of communication, in which the symbolic interaction concept of Habermas (see later) may prove out to be helpful.

The present subchapter is centered around his work titled *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas 1981), in which he works out, building upon communication theory as a fundament, his dichotomous social theory. The basic concepts he used in his earlier pieces (techné and praxis, work and interaction, purposive-rational systems and institutions, system integration and social integration) are re-formulated in the terms system and lifeworld, and instrumental action and communicative action (Felkai 1993). He intends to use these concepts to add new aspects to the topic of Weberian rationalization by capturing the structural changes of social institutions (Tanyi 1998).

1.2.4.1. System and Lifeworld

The **essence of the dichotomous social theory** of Habermas (1981) is that **society may be regarded in two ways**: from an internal, participant point of view, from which society appears as a **lifeworld**; and from an external, observant point of view, from which society can be described as a **system** of actions. Habermas (1981) argues that in order to be able to understand and analyze modern social processes, we need to picture them as the union of system and lifeworld. System and lifeworld represent the differing coordination mechanisms present in society: the system uses impersonal and non-normative methods, while the lifeworld applies normative controls and builds upon public consensus to achieve the coordination of individuals' actions. Therefore social sciences need to do their analyses from both viewpoints: the tools of systems theory (system) and those of interpretive sociology are equally needed.

First, I will introduce the two related concepts of system and purposive-rational action, as, in its description of the society (and the organizations operating within), the systems theory approach employs a point of view similar to that applied by contingency theory, which is discussed as fundamental knowledge in Hungarian organization theory literature (Bakacsi and Bokor 2002; Dobák and Antal 2010), and thus I hope that this concept will assist in finding a common ground. Afterwards, I will switch to discussing the concepts of lifeworld and communicative action, which will necessitate a stance that is closer to

the interpretive, constructivist approach to organizations.⁸ Lastly, I will consider the relationship between system and lifeworld as the two spheres of society, along with the main thesis of Habermas that in modern societies, the system acts to colonize the lifeworld.

The **system** is responsible for the material reproduction of society, and includes the economic, political and administrative processes that serve the coordination of unintentional actions by non-normative controls. System-level coordination is realized as the net sum of individual decisions, therefore the value of the consequences of individual decisions and actions is determined by their functional contribution to the maintenance of the system. The relations of the action system are neither transparent to, nor capable of being consciously influenced by the social individual (for example, the price structure resulting from the net sum of selling and purchasing decisions). The operation of systemic coordination follows the logic of the purposive-rational action structure, which does not necessarily require the actors to communicate. (Habermas 1981)

The concept of **purposive-rational action** was first described by Weber (2005b), and has since become particularly popular in economics, and other fields of social sciences, as well (Heap 1992). The rationality criterion associated with purposive-rational action is instrumental rationality, the rationality model that has been elaborated on the most in sociological and economic literature, that is the most widely used of all, and the one that can be expressed in terms of mathematical formulae, as well. In my dissertation, I draw from the Habermasian concepts of rationality and theory of action, thus I will refrain from reviewing the abundant literature of instrumental rationality and the criticism it received from within the paradigm, and from the discussion of alternative models of rationality, as well.

„By work or purposive-rational action I understand either instrumental action or rational choice or their conjunction.” (Habermas 1994a, 23) *Instrumental action* delivers the optimal combination of instruments for a given purpose or purposes, conforms to technical rules, builds upon empirical knowledge – applies procedures that have been tested and verified in experiments –, and it employs the method of induction (Habermas 1994a). *Rational choice* means that the individual makes a choice from a variety of

⁸ The similarities mentioned here are somewhat exaggerated. I believe, however, that positioning the concepts this way might provide useful guidance to those primarily engaged in mainstream management sciences.

alternative behaviors or strategies based on certain value or preference systems and general maxims. Its method is deduction, and it is based on analytical knowledge: success depends on the correct analysis of alternative behaviors. In the process of purposive-rational action, the individual might acquire skills and competences that may prove out to be useful in solving future problems.

In one of his later works, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas 1981), he suggested that the essence of purposive-rational action is its success orientation. Instead of rational choice, he talks about *strategic action*, which is distinguished from instrumental action by its social orientation: the measure of success is the efficiency of influencing the other participant in the communication, which can be evaluated based on the decisions made by the "rational counterplayer".

CT regards the concept of instrumental rationality, as the sole criterion of rationality, as far too narrow in scope, and, what is more, as expressly dangerous. This interpretation of rationality, namely, works with given purposes (preferences), and provides no normative basis for how the construction, the questioning and the revision of these purposes is supposed to become rational. Thus purposive rationality, on the one hand, only interprets action in its relation to individuality, and, on the other hand, it places action into a morally neutral domain. This approach is based on the Weberian interpretation of science we discussed in the previous chapter (see Chapter 1.2.3). Weber, in spite of his acceptance of the justification of value-based action and of his development of the concept of purposive-rational action (Weber 2005b), was convinced that a rational debate on values was impossible.

However, as Habermas points out, the bureaucratization (also discussed by Weber) and the Lukácsian reification resulting from the excessive propagation of purposive-rational action can only capture one level of modernization (Felkai 2011). On another level, one can also observe the elimination of the barriers to domination-free communication in modern societies (Felkai 2011). The development of the concepts of communicative action and rationality serves the conceptualization of this rational form of the social reconciliation of opinions, which then again constitutes the cornerstone of lifeworld's "war of independence" against the system (Felkai 2011).

Below, I will discuss the concepts of lifeworld and communicative action, and the related theories of action and society in a simultaneous manner, as there is a strong complementary relationship between the two.

Habermas decided to lay the foundations for the communication theory concept of lifeworld by comparing it with the phenomenological lifeworld concept as defined and redacted by Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann, respectively (Habermas 1981). To Schütz and Luckmann (2000), **lifeworld** meant the pre-science reality that was self-explanatory to mankind. „By the everyday life world is to be understood as that province of reality which the wide-awake and normal adult simply takes for granted in the attitude of common sense.” (Schütz and Luckmann 2000, 272) Habermas extended this functioning of the lifeworld as a body of naturally given, unquestioned and non-conscious background knowledge, which supplies the members of the lifeworld with unproblematic background beliefs in situations where inter-subjective positioning is required. In addition to all the above, he suggested that language and linguistically mediated patterns of cultural interpretation are in a similarly transcendent position, and are, therefore, also part of the lifeworld, as it is impossible for a speaker to step out of their embeddedness in language and culture. He proposed that „we can think of the lifeworld as represented by a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns.” (Habermas 1981, 364).

Lifeworld serves the coordination of actions through normative controls, with language and culture as resources in its service. When, however, social action comes to a halt because of differences in participants' definitions of the problem, and unquestioned background beliefs become problematic, a reconciliation of opinions is necessary. In such a case, the coordination of actions is accomplished by **communicative action** – that is: symbolically transmitted interaction. Communicative action is the complement of lifeworld, which conforms to inter-subjectively accepted and linguistically mediated norms. Its validity depends on mutual agreement, thus its rationality potential resides in the creation of consensus between participants. The success or the failure of an action depends on its social acceptance, and its validity is determined in a communal way, which ensures that the relations the individual creates in the lifeworld remain predictable and influenceable by them, as opposed to the unintentional, impersonal action-relationships of the system. (Habermas 1981)

The classification into the lifeworld (via the renewal of cultural knowledge, social memberships and personality) of the various situations requiring consensus is accomplished on the basis of formal world-concepts and the criticizable validity claims linked with them. Habermas distinguishes three types of actor-world relationship:

participants develop a pragmatic relation to (cultural) facts in the objective world, to norms in the social world, and to experiences in the subjective world. Mutual understanding between formal worlds is possible, while the pre-existing, unproblematized part of the lifeworld provides a background for communicative understanding. (Habermas 1981)

Habermas developed his typology of actions in accordance with the three-worlds theory, as well (see Table 3), drawing from the theories of Weber, Goffman and Austin. The three types of action listed in the table have three different criticizable **validity claims** associated with them. *Constative speech acts* can be contested under the aspect of truth – that is, whether the statement proves true in the light of certain verifiable facts (Felkai 2011). We store these pieces of knowledge in the form of theories. *Normatively regulated actions* can be judged from the standpoint of rightness – that is, whether what the speaker does or says is morally right. Participants are equally entitled to criticize the rightness of either the action or the norm. This sort of knowledge is reflected in legal rules and in ethics principles and practices. *Dramaturgical actions* serve to present the subjective knowledge of the actor, which can be criticized in reference to truthfulness (or sincerity) claims. Untruthfulness may originate in deception or self-deception, the latter of which might be uncovered in the course of therapeutic⁹ conversations (critical self-reflection). This type of knowledge is, for the most part, transmitted by pieces of art. (Habermas 1981)

⁹ In the Freudian sense.

Table 3: Pure Types of Linguistically Mediated Interaction

Formal-pragmatic features Types of Action	Characteristic speech acts	Functions of speech	Basic attitudes	Validity claims	World relations
<i>Conversation</i>	Constatives	Representations of states of affairs	Objectivating	Truth	Objective world
<i>Normatively regulated action</i>	Regulatives	Establishment of interpersonal relations	Norm-conformative	Rightness	Social World
<i>Dramaturgical action</i>	Expressives	Self-representation	Expressive	Truthfulness	Subjective world

Source: (Habermas 1981, 231)¹⁰

The most unique proposition of Habermas was that of communicative action, which, as the fourth type of action, stands for the reconciliation process that aims at mutual understanding and agreement, that is, for the dialogue between the actors (Felkai 2011). A unique characteristic of communicative action is that it can take any one of the three forms – constative, normatively regulated or dramaturgical – of action, given that these are embedded in a situation where participants are basically oriented to reaching mutual understanding. The pure types of communicative action are associated with a single actor-world relation each, yet real communicative acts rather tend to be embedded in more than one world-relation simultaneously (Habermas 1981), that is, they need to fulfil more than one validity claim. Meeting the validity claims – that speech acts be true, right, truthful and understandable¹¹ – may be interpreted as a condition for communication. As if the truthfulness of one of the communicating parties is getting questioned all the time, it will be impossible to keep up the conversation in the long run (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). The „culturalistically abridged concept of the lifeworld”, as Habermas (1981, 375) put it, presented above needs amendment, given that **in their communicative actions, the individual does not only renew their cultural knowledge, but they also consolidate**

¹⁰ The original table contains some additional rows and columns, which I decided to leave out in order not to interfere with the line of thought presented here.

¹¹ This latter validity claim was added by Habermas somewhat later; for details see: Felkai, 2011.

their personal identity and social memberships. Therefore Habermas, again in accordance with the theory of formal world-concepts, differentiates between three symbolic structural components of the lifeworld, based on the reproductive function of the communicative action: culture, society and personality. These are developed and renewed by the processes of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization, through the mediation of communicative actions (Habermas 1981).

Habermas summarized the relationships between the structural components of the lifeworld and reproduction processes in three tables, which I will discuss below. Table 4 shows the contributions of the cultural, social and socialization processes to the renewal and maintenance of the lifeworld, that is, its focus is on content. Table 5 demonstrates how communicative actions act to reproduce the structural components of the lifeworld (the "contents" introduced in the previous table), that is, it concentrates on the process. Lastly, Table 6 presents the manifestations of crisis appearing in the lifeworld when reproduction processes do not function as intended.

Table 4: Contributions of Reproduction Processes to Maintaining the Structural Components of the Lifeworld

Structural components Reproduction processes	Culture	Society	Personality
Cultural reproduction	Interpretive schemes fit for consensus („valid knowledge”)	Legitimations	Socialization patterns Educational goals
Social integration	Obligations	Legitimately ordered interpersonal relations	Social memberships
Socialization	Interpretive accomplishments	Motivations for actions that conform to norms	Interactive capabilities ("personal identity")

Source: (Habermas 1981, 170)

Table 5: Reproductive Functions of Action Oriented to Mutual Understanding

Structural components Reproduction processes	Culture	Society	Personality
Cultural reproduction	Transmission, critique, acquisition of cultural knowledge	Renewal of knowledge effective for legitimation	Reproduction of knowledge relevant to child rearing, education
Social integration	Immunization of a central stock of value orientations	Coordination of actions via intersubjectively recognized validity claims	Reproduction of patterns of social membership
Socialization	Enculturation	Internalization of values	Formation of identity

Source: (Habermas 1981, 171)

Cultural reproduction ensures the coherence of valid knowledge, needed for one's orientation in life, by creating the interpretive schemes required for consensus. If the continuity of transmission remains undisturbed, participants will possess the rational knowledge required for orientation; otherwise, a loss of meaning happens: participants' body of cultural knowledge turns irrational, the world of meaning of traditions and symbols becomes inaccessible, the norms accepted by society and, accordingly, the prevailing principles of education get challenged. Should this be the case, participants will not be able to use their current interpretive schemes in unknown situations. Intellect as a resource becomes exhausted. (Habermas 1981)

Table 6: Manifestations of Crisis When Reproduction Processes Are Disturbed (Pathologies)

Structural components Disturbances in the domain of	Culture	Society	Person	Dimension of evaluation
Cultural reproduction	Loss of meaning	Withdrawal of legitimation	Crisis in orientation and education	Rationality of knowledge
Social integration	Unsettling of collective identity	Anomie	Alienation	Solidarity of members
Socialization	Rupture of tradition	Withdrawal of motivation	Psychopathologies	Personal responsibility

Source: (Habermas 1981, 170)

Social reproduction creates legitimate interpersonal relations, and thus the legitimately controlled coordination of actions, as well. It defines the moral obligations of the individual, the demands they can be reasonably expected to meet. And finally, as a result of all these, it acts to consolidate social memberships. The stability of group identities can be measured in terms of the solidarity – that is: the "keeping together" – of participants. Disturbances in reproduction lead to anomie: members of the society fail to meet their obligations, as they are unable to cover their need for mutual understanding using the set of legitimate controls, the feeling of belonging to a group and the sense of cultural identity deteriorates. The individual's personality shows the symptoms of alienation, the social self – as opposed to the "real" self – is born, the behavior that conforms to social expectations does not concur with personal persuasions, and hence communicative action can only lead to pseudo-consensus. These phenomena all indicate that the lifeworld is running out of its solidarity-generating resource (Habermas 1981).

Socialization ensures the coordination of individual life histories and community life-forms, and hence the formation of personal identities. During the process, the individual acquires the interaction skills that enable them to participate in communicative action, and the valid knowledge that assists them in interpreting culturally mediated schemes. The motivations for actions that conform to norms are also formed by the socialization process. The effectiveness of the process can be measured in terms of the responsibility

and accountability. In case of disturbances in the reproduction process, the personality shows psychopathological symptoms, and thus it becomes impossible to make them accountable. In the society, this manifests itself in the elimination of the motivations for conforming to norms, and in a rupture in cultural traditions. Individuals' skills are insufficient for maintaining the intersubjective validity of action situations, therefore they fall back upon various *defense strategies*, which render mutual consensus superfluous, and thus they merely seek compromise, and not consensus. What makes this possible is the introduction of impersonal control mechanisms, which make discourses on action situations unnecessary. (Habermas 1981)

We can summarize the above as follows: in Habermas's dichotomous interpretation of society, the mechanism of mutual understanding coordinates the orientations of actions, while the consequences of actions are arranged by system-like mechanisms based on their functional value. Hence we define society as a system that is required to meet the conditions of maintaining socio-cultural lifeworlds or, to put it another way, *society can be defined as the entirety of the systematically stabilized action relations of socially integrated groups* (Habermas 1981).

1.2.4.2. Colonization of the Lifeworld

Habermas (1981) completed the historical analysis of the relationship of system and lifeworld under the aspect of social evolution. I will refrain from a detailed discussion of that here; as it does not offer analytical tools relevant to the analysis of corporate Christmas, I will only provide a concise description to sum up the main points.

Habermas **identified three tendencies in social development:**

- (1) the differentiation of the system, that is, the intensification of society's governance competencies;
- (2) the rationalization of the lifeworld, that is, the separation of culture, society and personality from each other, and the development of law and ethics to a post-conventional level; and
- (3) the detachment of system and lifeworld, that is, the mechanisms of money and power becoming independent of the symbolic relationships of the lifeworld.

Even though the detachment of system and lifeworld is a precondition of the development process that the modern age has been witnessing, with respect to both the differentiation of the system and the rationalization of the lifeworld, it is the norm-free social structure

of money and power as language-deprived communication media that allows for the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld to become subjected to material reproduction.

In money-controlled social formations, like capitalism, **the economic subsystem is the field of a morally neutral system of actions**, where it is the impersonal coordination mechanism – money – that coordinates individual actions, anchored in the institutions of civil / private law. In the economic subsystem, the form of state-independent organizations is established – companies, namely –, which allow for organizing the division of labor in a more efficient way. The membership of these organizations follows a logic similar to that of citizenship: the individual joins one of the organizations out of their free will, under the condition of accepting the behavioral expectations set by the organization in question. This manifests itself in the contract, which is concluded in accordance with the regulations of civil law, and in which the formation of mutual consensus between the parties is submitted to the rule of formal law. This way, **organizations can liberate themselves from the communicatively structured relations in the lifeworld** (Habermas 1981). As there is no need to create mutual consensus between individuals by the means of communication – for it is ensured by formal law –, the room for conflict between individuals shrinks to a minimum, as well: individual value orientations are indifferent to the operation of the organization.

Thus modernization creates an infrastructure of society that encompasses all areas of life: the army, the education system, health care and even the family; *and it conditions the individual to having the opportunity of switching, at any time, from interaction relations to purposive-rational action* (Habermas 1994a). However, the two types of action – communicative and purposive-rational, that is – necessitate two completely different attitudes: the former means communication between two equal parties, while in the latter case, actors regard each other as a necessary means of achieving their respective goals, and their communication is guided by their individual interests – that is: by strategies – instead of solidarity or a desire for consensus (Habermas 1981).

The **colonization** of the lifeworld takes place by purposive-rational action taking over the functions of communicative action in the reproduction of the lifeworld. In modern societies, systemic integration interferes with social integration, and becomes dominant even in areas where the type of coordination that is based on mutual understanding and consensus is non-substitutable. Though functional relations remain latent, they do have an instrumentalizing effect on the lifeworld: the subjective imperceptibility of systematic

constraints appears in the form of objectively false intellect. Which means that systemic effects alter the structure of the action-relations of socially integrated groups without structural violence actually manifesting itself. **This structural violence is accomplished through the methodical distortion of communication**, that is, through the formation of the system of distorted communication: the system's requirements get anchored into the lifeworld in such a way that the relationships between the objective, social and subjective worlds appear to participants as if they were pre-determined. (Habermas 1981)

Examples for the phenomenon of colonization include the commercialization of leisure and entertainment, the declaration of corporate values to facilitate the building of a strong culture (Alvesson and Willmott 1996) or the commercialization of Christmas as a festivity, which, for example, led to the morally meaningful word *present* become a synonym of the words *buy* or *purchase*. An instance of colonization is, moreover, the submission of science and universities to business interests, by which knowledge ceased to represent a value of and in itself and to make sense because of its purpose to get to know the world – now, it makes sense because of its economic utility and marketability, which is why universities do not educate knowledgeable students any more, but produce labor market commodities instead.

The reason why **colonization** is a problem is that, in the end, it **leads to pathologies in the processes of the lifeworld**, the symptoms of which are various manifestations of crisis in society: anomie, alienation, loss of meaning (see Table 6). However, as a consequence of the disruption of social integration, problems arise not only in the lifeworld, but in the system, as well: its colonization of the lifeworld also hits back upon the system itself, insofar as participants will be neither able, nor willing to contribute to material reproduction (Habermas 1981).

Colonization cannot become a total phenomenon (Hancock and Tyler 2008), it keeps encountering legitimation and motivation problems, for money and power are in fact unable to substitute solidarity and the creation of meaning (Alvesson and Willmott 1996; Habermas 1994b), which then again acts against the smoothness of material reproduction. This is the explanation for why motivation has been a recurring topic of management: if, by the loss of the internal meaning of work (see pathologies), motivation is lost, then the only way to foster efficient production is to introduce new methods of control, whether they be structural or cultural. Yet controls have significant cost consequences, and what is more, there will be further legitimation problems arising: meaning created in an

administrative way, submitted to technical rationality, will result in so-called dramaturgical compliance only (Alvesson and Willmott 1996; Willmott 1993), that is, in play-acting, simulation, pretense. This leads to a vicious circle that will be impossible to break by a series of newer and newer sophisticated management tools.

It is important to note, however, that in Habermas's theory, the formation of the capitalist system is the result of an evolution process, thus the critique of colonization is by no means associated with some romantic nostalgia for the innocent past. Neither the rationality of the system, nor that of the lifeworld would justify such a feeling. Capitalism, undoubtedly, has brought about an increase in welfare, and increased the room for ideology-free rational reasoning in social decision making. **The task of the critical social scientist** is to uncover the uncertain foundations and the oppressive force of technical rationality; to open up a space where the further rationalization of the lifeworld, instead of technicization, and the evolution of democratic movements following the values of autonomy and social responsibility become possible (Alvesson and Willmott 1996).

I.3. Critical Theory in Organizational Research

Representatives of critical theory in the field of organizational research support **social changes that originate in organizations**. The main motive behind their objective is the realization that „people and nature become the means of technical problem solving” (Alvesson and Deetz 1998, 5). Organizations have turned into a space where instrumental thinking prevails, where the value of purposes is determined by the instruments available (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). Though the emergence of *human relations* theories acted to bring back the traditional value system and human aspects into the foreground, these approaches have also become strategized in the organizational space (Alvesson and Deetz 1998), that is, they have come to be deployed for the sake of performance improvement, thus the dominant logic has not been broken.

Which, however, does not mean that technical problem solving could not be a legitimate, socially important purpose (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). Of course, organizations do contribute to material survival and welfare, and to our satisfaction with our work, and they might create positive social relationships, as well (Alvesson and Deetz 1998). In this status quo, however, the distinct social group of managers is directly accountable to the respective owners, and not to employees or consumers (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). Though the rule that "the customer is king" is part of the dominant ideology, there is no

concrete accountability (see Table 6): modern organizations have become institutionalized forms of the lack of democratic control (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). Critical organizational research reveals how organizational structure and culture serve as the means of domination and control (Andreas G. Scherer 2009; Willmott 1993). The task of organizational research is **the critical analysis of the organizational practices that act to maintain and legitimate the pathologies of the one-sidedly rationalized lifeworld** (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). How do organizations normalize continuous stress and bad health, subjection, exploitation and conformism; furthermore, how do they limit free communication, how do they erode morality, and how do they create and maintain unequal social relations based on race or social gender? (Alvesson et al., 2009) One of the most compelling challenges is to amend organizational structures in a way that liberates people (employees, managers and consumers alike) from repression and marginalization (Andreas G. Scherer 2009). The communication process is key to this change: the goal is to achieve that organizational decisions not be based on a mere exercise of power, but rather on open reasoning (Andreas G. Scherer 2009).

Another **aim of critical organizational research is reconstruction**, that is, to reveal the ideological load of the various interpretations, and to uncover the system of distorted communication (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). These in fact necessitate the continuous questioning and the consequent re-interpretation of interviewees' interpretations and empirical experiences, which clearly goes beyond the historical-hermeneutic interpretive attitude. Critical organizational researchers admittedly work with their own subjectivity. Reconstruction takes place in two phases, the first of which is uncovering, and the second being the exploration of alternative modes of organization. Thus first of all, a new social/stakeholder discourse needs to unfold on how social forces condition individual interpretations, which discourse might then lead to the discovery of new, alternative modes of meaning construction (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). True criticism requires the critic to assume responsibility for the problems identified, and to partake in finding the solution – for example, to participate in the development of new, alternative ways of organizing work (Alvesson and Willmott 1996).

1.3.1. Organizational Ideology and/or Organizational Communication

Critical research into organizational matters aim at, on the one hand, the examination of intra-organization forms of domination and, on the other hand, the analysis of the interactions between organizations and the broader social environment, which require two

different viewpoints from the researcher's side. In the first case, the **researcher takes the internal point of view** and concentrates on the cognitive schemes frozen by instrumental thinking, on the distortions arising from the predominance of technocracy, careerism and economic growth (Alvesson and Deetz 1998). The **researcher who opts for an external point of view** regards organizations as now-independent formations in the economic subsystem that determine the quality of interpersonal interactions (Habermas 1981), and examines the consequences in the broad social environment. CT offers a number of research topics that present themselves for analysis from either point of view: for example rationality, technocracy and social engineering, autonomy and control, communicative action, power and ideology, epistemological questions (Alvesson, Bridgman, and Willmott 2009). Another difference between the researches focusing on the internal world of organizations and those concentrating on the social effects reaching beyond the boundaries of organizations is that they typically rely on the traditions of differing generations of the Frankfurt School.

Ideology critique prefers the internal viewpoint, and relies, for the most part, on the research achievements of the first generation: the focus is on the exploitation of the proletariat, the problems of alienation and reification, and the alienation of human conscience. They consider autocratic social relations, dishonoring work conditions and the low degree of discretion to be harmful for the psychological well-being of people (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). Research into quality of life in the workplace has shown that somatic diseases are related to authoritarian leadership style and to the employee being unable to make use of their abilities and knowledge, having no influence on how work is planned and organized and not being allowed to socialize with co-workers (Deetz 1992). The unequal relationship between manager and subordinate leads to, on the employee's side, a feeling of addiction, distress and vulnerability, and moreover to passive conformity, compensatory consumption and an authoritarian attitude (Kohn, 1980 In: Alvesson and Willmott 1996).

Modern human resource management practices and corporate culture programs are suitable for taking advantage of the distress of the people who have become uncertain and have lost their self-esteem in the capitalist society (Alvesson and Willmott 1996) by offering, in exchange for obedience, a remedy in the form of externally determined, "readymade" identities, desires, purposes, values, interpretations and behavioral norms

that serve the purposes of the system. Organizational analyses seek the answer to why employees are unable to recognize that they are being exploited; why managers' pursuit of autonomy typically fails; what the totality of organizational socialization results in; how cultural-ideological control is accomplished on different levels of the organizational hierarchy; how the pressure for conformism gets the upper hand; and how modern society acts to standardize, for example through careerism, the ways of satisfying needs (Alvesson and Deetz 1998). Basically, there are four recurring themes: naturalization, the universalization of managerial interests, the predominance of instrumental reasoning and hegemony (Alvesson and Deetz 1998).

Research into the social-environmental effects that reach beyond the boundaries of organizations rather rely on the works of second-generation of the Frankfurt School, and dominantly on the **communication theory** of Habermas within. The theory of system and lifeworld is capable of integrating the main aspects of ideology critique, yet their effects are presented through interventions into the structures of communicative action. The theory is employed in analyses of distortions in organizational communication processes, which regard organizations as structures of communicative interactions (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). By that, they can avoid the pitfall of ideology critique: the trouble of defining real needs, real conscience and the essence of human nature (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). They study instead the systematic distortions – e.g. technocracy, consumerism, sexism, racism – affecting the basic conditions of human communication (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). This perspective enables the effect organizations have on society to be integrated into the scope of interest of critical management studies, as the topic, according to Hancock and Tyler (2008), has not received due scientific attention in recent decades. The authors argue that instead of critical management studies, we should rather pursue critical studies of management, which includes themes like the managerialization of everyday life, as well (Hancock and Tyler 2008).

There is a large number of publications in management literature that were inspired by Habermas' works. The conditions for the ideal speech situation, that is, for a domination-free discourse, have been examined both in the context of social responsibility related stakeholder discourses (Unerman and Bennett 2004) and information technology (Drake, Yuthas, and Dillard 2000). The analysis of interactions according to validity claims is used, for example, to reveal the democratic or power-laden nature of strategic decision making processes (Forester 2003; Samra-Fredericks 2005). Knowledge-constitutive

interests (technical, practical and emancipatory) have inspired debates on the purpose of organization theory as a science, on the process of knowledge construction and on the scientific methodology to be applied (Stablein and Nord 1985; Willmott 1997; Willmott 2005). Scherer and Palazzo (2007) have developed a new model of social responsibility building upon the theory of deliberative democracy, which then again was meant to remedy the utopian ideas of the theory of communicative action. I will provide a more detailed overview of the pieces of organization theory literature that make use of the system and lifeworld theory in the next chapter, thus they will not be mentioned here.

As a follow-up to the organization theory related metaphors of Gareth Morgan (1996), Alvesson and Willmott (1996) worked out four alternative metaphors intended to facilitate the critical analysis of management: (1) management as mystification; (2) management as cultural doping; (3) management as distorted communication; (4) management as colonizing power. The first two metaphors are related to the ideological load of management, while the latter two rather follow the communication theory line of thought.

- (1) The **management as mystification** approach uncovers how managers, by employing symbols and ceremonies, influence the processes through which people construct the meaning of and participate in social reality. TQM and 'soft' HRM approaches, for example, mystify freedom, creativity and flat organizational structure, while they actually create new forms of control, camouflaged behind a new ideology. *Empowerment*, which is actually "donated" to the employee by the management, appears as if it would be real emancipation. Which is, however, impossible without collective action against dominance (Alvesson and Willmott 1996).
- (2) **Management as cultural doping.** The best means of socialization are corporate culture programs, which take the form of organizational rituals. The company uses these programs to communicate which values and virtues are considered "right". Ideological pressure is particularly difficult to resist, as rituals typically play upon people's instincts and affect the subconscious, which renders critical evaluation almost impossible (Alvesson and Willmott 1996).
- (3) The **management as distorted communication** metaphor concentrates on the analysis of communication in the organizational space and of management texts

(textbooks, bestsellers, magazines, etc.), and calls attention to the hegemony of instrumental rationality. The authors mention the rhetoric of BPR (Business Process Reengineering) as an example: expressions suggesting solidarity and democracy – like teamwork and empowerment – are only legitimated by the role they have in improving efficiency. And their meaning, as well, changes – that is to say: is distorted – accordingly: the implementation of BPR is, in spite of its promise of democracy in the workplace, controlled strictly from above, and key to its success are an ironhanded management and the overcoming of organizational resistance. (Alvesson and Willmott 1996)

- (4) The **management as colonizing power** metaphor is based on Habermas's colonization theory. In the organizational world, practices and interpretations related to instrumental rationality dominate and crowd out the discourses and practices related to the everyday issues of the lifeworld. To corporations, people represent objects or instruments the value of which is solely determined by their functional contribution to maintaining the system. In modern organizations, the lifeworld is often regarded as an irrational hindrance to the operation of the system or a mere resource to be used to revitalize exhausted bureaucratic systems (Alvesson and Willmott 1996).

Alvesson and Willmott (1996) assert, furthermore, that lifeworld's devaluation in the economic sphere is not only "bad", but expressly perverted, as the operation of the system depends on that of the lifeworld: on a society-wide level, purposive-rational action is impossible without a certain minimum degree of mutual understanding and consensus. Even though the legal environment (e.g. anti-discrimination laws) or consumer needs (e.g. demand for fair trade products) are intended to convey the normative order to corporations on the macro-level, it is still unthinkable that participants judge the rightness of each and every situation/action by reference to legislation. There are situations when actors cannot switch from an orientation to mutual understanding to a strategic (perlocutionary) attitude, and if they still do, that will jeopardize the reproduction of the lifeworld, and leads to manipulation and demoralization.

The colonization metaphor can incorporate the considerations inspired by the first three metaphors (mystification, cultural doping, distorted communication), as all of them are concerned with those challenges of management and corporate origins that affect self-

identities, cultural-moral values and solidarity (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). This is, however, not much of a surprise, as *The Theory of Communicative Action* itself is a monumental piece of work synthesizing a number of previously published sociological theories, each concerned with a different social phenomenon. Which is exactly what its brilliance comes from: it creates a comprehensive socio-theoretical framework that allows for a complex interpretation of modern-age social phenomena in their interrelatedness. For the very same reason, adapting the theory to organizational analyses might prove out to be revelatory: it is an opportunity for the interpretation of organizational phenomena amidst their complex social relations, for the re-interpretation of earlier research findings, and that from a socially critical perspective.

The interrelatedness of the metaphors is also supported by what Habermas (1981) pointed out in his analysis: it is societies at a lower level of social development where myths and rituals have a particularly important role in the reproduction of the lifeworld. The fact that management resorts to these very measures during corporate culture building or change management efforts – recall Parker's (2002) words: management is a new religion – reveals a special aspect of the irrationality of modern-age rationality, the charge Adorno and Horkheimer formulated in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* against the civilized world. This same paradox is pointed out by Hancock's (1997) analysis, too, according to which the irrational world of organizational symbolism built upon existential fear and uncertainty binds the individual subject to the organizational superego and submits it to a vassalage-like state of dependency.

The phenomenon of corporate Christmas – which includes ritual practices and mythical elements – can be analyzed using any one of the four metaphors, thus as a research topic, it is suitable for exploring the depths of the relationship between corporations and society, of the contribution of corporations to social development. My thesis employs the last metaphor – colonization – in order to systematize the knowledge acquired. Thus now, we switch to the Habermasian analysis of corporations' role in society.

1.3.2. The Corporation as Colonizing Power

The operation of modern corporations carries the risk of having a colonizing effect on the lifeworld. In my dissertation, I will use the framework provided by the theory of communicative action to shed new light upon certain processes related to organizations and to their interaction with society. By no means can we state in general, however, that all corporations colonize the lifeworld. A number of corporate actions or practices could

be mentioned – many of them from the very fields of human resource management or organizational development – that do actually foster democratic modes of operation, domination-free discourses, the involvement of stakeholders and self-governance, and that do provide an opportunity for emancipation (see (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). Exploring and evaluating these practices is also an important duty of organizational research, yet my thesis is meant to concentrate on the "dark side" of organizations, thus my discussion of the topic will, in that sense, be admittedly one-sided.

My effort is backed by the fact that in international literature, the debate on the colonizing role of corporations started way back in the beginning of the nineties, an important milestone in which was Deetz's *Democracy in an Age of Corporate Colonization* in 1992. As far as the Hungarian business administration audience is concerned, this debate is among the less widely known ones, as those were the very years when the foundations of modern management in the country had to be laid¹². I believe the concern Deetz formulated in 1992 that „the tragedy is that the Eastern European nations may lose their democracy to external corporate structures almost as soon as they gain it from external state ones." (Deetz 1992, 3) is still very current. What is more, Hungary's under-developed democratic culture (Felkai 1997) might, in my opinion, make the society particularly vulnerable to the anti-democratic tendencies in the corporate sphere.

The most surprising approach suggests that the all-encompassing power of modern corporations, which has infiltrated each segment of our off-work lives, is reminiscent of the feudalism of the Middle Ages (Deetz 1992; Hancock 1997). The suggestion is undoubtedly an extreme one, yet it might indeed be worth considering what it means that corporations have become the primary institutions in modern capitalist societies, playing an ever more important role in the re-creation of personal identities, values, knowledge and meaning, thereby replacing religious, familiar, educational and communal institutions. The seeping in of corporate ideology into other institutions of the society acts to suppress potential conflicts. The state strives to ensure, in the name of the public good, an appropriate rate of economic growth, the family provides emotional support and quality of life instead of transforming values and identities, while the education system trains marketable students instead of planting the seeds of autonomy and critical thinking (Deetz 1992).

¹² In this regard, the work of professor Sándor Kovács was an exception; my dissertation also relies on his intellectual tradition to a great extent. For a commemoration of his work see: (Bakacsi et al. 2008)

Corporations, originally meant to ensure material reproduction, are becoming more and more of a determinative factor in cultural and socialization processes, and in social integration, strengthening the influence of instrumental thinking – that is, they colonize the lifeworld. According to Deetz (1992), the corporation tends to be a beneficiary, rather than an initiator in these processes. Thus it really makes no sense to put all the blame on corporations, especially if we consider that it is the conscience and the actions of the members of society that maintain the corporation as a social construct, that turn it into a real economic actor. Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the lobbying activities of corporations, either, and the extent of their efforts to influence their corporate (PR) and employee (HR) relations.

Deetz (1992) provides a one-by-one discussion of the areas through which the corporation's central role in society manifests itself. Even though in his introduction to his book, he named the theories of Habermas and Foucault as a point of reference, the rhetoric he used in this very analysis rather resembled that of ideology critique. Below, I will try to interpret his suggestions within the conceptual framework of system and lifeworld.

(1) The most apparent one is the **shrinking of state involvement in favor of the corporation in matters of public interest that affect a large part of society**. The extent and the breadth of the power multinational companies hold exceed that of nation states (Morgan, 1986 In: Deetz 1992). It is a relatively small group in charge of multinational corporations who make decisions on technological developments, the utilization of resources and on workplace relations (Perrow, 1979 In: Deetz 1992). The institution of the strong state is not viable because it imposes limitations on individual freedom in far too obvious ways, and tries to preserve its power by restricting discourses on control (Deetz 1992). Corporate power, on the contrary, takes a decentralized form, dispersed into the standard practices of social norms comprising various moral, health, sexual and psychological rules – this is the form of power that Foucault (1986 In: Deetz 1992) referred to as discipline.

Formulated in Habermasian concepts, dispersed disciplinary power conceals itself by the unconscious distortion of communication, when validity claims cannot be detached from the strategically oriented (perlocutionary) speech acts – that is: what is efficient and effective is either automatically considered morally right, objectively true and subjectively truthful or the discussion of these is regarded as irrelevant and irrational.

Hidden behind the mask of normality, corporate power actually avoids democracy, as we cannot engage in a valid discourse on the topic. Thus the problem does not reside in the weakening of state power itself, said Deetz, but rather in how this decentralized power is organized and totalized through the corporation, and how the state serves as an accomplice in that.

(2) **Both the family and the local community has lost its primary institutional function in education and socialization**, which spaces have been conquered by the corporation. According to Deetz (1992), one of the reasons is the dual-earner family model, because of which children are not brought up by their parents/grandparents any more, but they are socialized in and by company-operated kindergartens. This problem is, however, less relevant in Hungary. Much unlike the other cause identified by Deetz: the loss of function of local communities because of our increased geographical mobility, which then again carries the promise of social mobility. Our identities, consequently, will rather be attached to the company or our career instead of some constantly changing local community, which results in the weakening of social solidarity (Deetz 1992).

In the Habermasian conceptual framework, a company-linked identity and socialization constitute the fundamentals for the accountability of the individual against corporate values (efficient and effective work), that is, the individual possesses the interaction skills associated with corporate life, demonstrates loyalty and solidarity with their workplace/professional community, is motivated to conform with corporate norms in their behavior and is able to interpret the patterns of corporate life and communication. These are all necessary, but not sufficient conditions for social well-being and a democratic mode of operation. What is missing is the ability to find their way through the social relations of everyday life outside the corporation: competences; the legitimate social order, which is the remedy for anomie according to Durkheim; the willingness to participate in politics; the ability to establish intimate social relations; the ability to resolve problems in the family, to attribute meaning to traditions, to transmit the appropriate principles and methods of child-rearing.

(3) School **education** is also penetrated by hidden corporate disciplinary power. Competence-based education aligns schools' and higher education institutions' curricula with corporate interests – rhetorically: with labor market demand. Education is capable of reproducing the patterns of perception, cognition, evaluation and action that are preferred by the social groups in the name of whom education is performed. Students'

demand for practical, utilizable (that is: marketable in the labor market) knowledge and its primacy over theoretical knowledge – which I am often faced with myself – initially served to protect the interests of uneducated post-WWII managers. By now, it has become a manifestation of the primacy of knowledge that can serve the corporation's interests. Yet it is not only public education that is organized according to corporate interests; a much more obvious means of influence are corporate trainings, which are intended to prepare for challenges in the workplace (Deetz 1992).

It is not by coincidence that critical management regards public education, higher education and human resource development as some of its main areas of intervention (Contu 2009). Education affects all three reproduction processes of the lifeworld: the renewal of cultural knowledge, social integration processes and socialization.

(4) Finally, corporations dominate the **mass media**; the communication industry is characterized by a high degree of concentration. Deetz (1992) expressed the view that news editing in the communication media conforms with corporate interests because of private ownership and a system of interwoven interests originating in the lack of competition. Many have looked into the role and the effect of advertisements. The most serious problem with advertisements is, according to CT, that they generate false needs, which (positivist) science then again treats as given. Deetz (1992) posed the question of what we would think if it was the state that broadcasted some sort of propaganda every 15 to 20 minutes? Advertisements do not only promote consumption, which constitutes a reason for environmental concern in itself, but they also compel the individual to define status, identity and norm conformity in terms of consumer goods, and to shift their attention to following system-defined purposes instead of their own autonomously defined purposes that have their roots in the lifeworld.

To sum it up: the gaining ground of companies in other spheres of society takes place parallel to the deinstitutionalization of the lifeworld, that is, the members of society lose their trust and faith in and their commitment to traditional institutions and values (Deetz 1992). **Corporations offer a secondary value system and institutions to replace the primary value system and institutions of the lifeworld** (Deetz 1992), thus participants can, at any time, switch from the symbolic relations of the lifeworld to an instrumental attitude and relations (Habermas 1981): to turning to a therapist instead of our friends, substituting our own child-rearing with a babysitter, relying on the values declared by

public education and corporations instead of community transmitted values, conforming to legal regulations instead of public morals (Deetz 1992).

Even though Deetz underlined that his analysis should not be interpreted as nostalgia for some sort of "good old times", still, he compared present institutional structures with those of the past in order to point out certain tendencies, and thus the primary conclusion was the gaining ground of corporate power. Which made the previous institutional structure appear as if it was more democratic, more ideal. There are two interpretations to this rhetoric: (1) he compared today's social structure with one that has never existed: the one that corresponds to the ideas of enlightenment or (2) he analyzed the observed tendencies under the aspect of corporate power – yet not along the dimensions of democracy –, which must have been, obviously, minimal in the social formations preceding capitalism. **Thus we might suspect some sort of traditional value system in the hazy background of his analysis, which makes it vulnerable to both post-modernist and positivist critique. This is the very same problem that ideology critique has to face.** In the next chapter, I will introduce an approach that is far more methodical in building upon the Habermasian theory of communication, and that is capable of taking advantage of the potential in creating a rational foundation for criticism.

1.3.3. Management as Colonizing Power

Hancock and Tyler (2004; 2008) already focused their analysis on management, instead of the corporation. Thereby they could avoid the risk of creating a scapegoat, and at the same time, allowed of the analysis of non-corporate forms of management and of a better understanding of the phenomenon of managerialist hegemony (Deetz 1992; Forgacs 1988; Hancock and Tyler 2008). Management, in their interpretation, is an institutional arrangement through which both the formal domain of the organization and the lifeworld become subjects to the governing medium, which is linked with the administrative power of the state, with the operation of money or law (Hancock and Tyler 2008).

Along with the structural differentiation – that is: evolution – of the lifeworld, management, as a manifestation of systemic coordination, has also continuously gained in influence (Hancock and Tyler 2008). Habermas mentioned and analyzed the phenomenon of juridification as an empirical example for the colonization of the lifeworld (Habermas 1981); he distinguished between the regulative and constitutive functions of law (Power, Laughlin, and Cooper 2003). In a regulative sense, law as an institution provides resources and information for the communicative reproduction of the

lifeworld; in a constitutive sense, however, it takes over the role of the governing medium, and re-constitutes the structure of – that is: colonizes – the lifeworld (Habermas 1981). Power, Laughlin and Cooper (2003) applied the analogy to the field of accounting and controlling, arguing that the impact these management functions have on the lifeworld is similar to that of law. Hancock and Tyler (2008) extended the analogy and asserted that modern management – including all management functions – takes the role of the governing medium and constitutively shapes the structure of the lifeworld. **Management acts to substitute communicative practice with structures of conscience, language and action that align to the rules of instrumentality and utility.** The instrumentalized logic of management is omnipresent, hidden between the conceptual, linguistic and symbolic resources of the everyday lifeworld: instrumental, system-oriented argumentation infiltrates the linguistic-cultural resources that constitute the unconscious background for the communicative rationality of the lifeworld (see the lifeworld concept of Schütz in chapter I.2.2.) (Hancock and Tyler 2008).

The most obvious manifestation of the colonizing effect of management is the formation of expert culture (Habermas 1981; Hancock and Tyler 2008), when we seem to need expert knowledge to understand and "manage" even the most everyday of phenomena in our lives. It is the use of language that becomes managerialistic, and the values, terminology and, consequently, the systemic logic used in the economy are transferred into the everyday of the lifeworld. Hancock and Tyler (2008) listed a number of examples for the phenomenon: NLP (neuro-linguistic programming), managing body weight issues, lifestyle coaching, lifestyle magazines, the expert treatment of sexual problems, the birth of the sleep management industry. In these situations, the self is regarded as a marketable commodity that is a management project positioned with respect to others and subject to continuous performance evaluation (Hancock and Tyler 2008).

Modern societies are characterized by a certain investment-orientation in life, in everyday activities (Hancock and Tyler 2004): we need to manage ourselves, and strive for success – not only in our careers, but in our private lives, as well. The driving force behind self-management, personal control and the pursuit of perfection is the very principle of performativity the criticism against which CMS is centered around. The authors (Hancock and Tyler 2004) contrast everyday management – which necessitates planned, efficient and purposive-rational actions – with the spontaneity, the playfulness, the sensitivity, the informal nature, the heterogeneity and the relative freedom of everyday life, all of which

we might lose because of our instrumental attitude. Whereas freedom and happiness do not only come from creative work, but also from love and spontaneity (Fromm 2008). Management as a form of cultural technology widely promoted in everyday life only offers a form of pseudo-rationality (Hancock and Tyler 2004).

Hancock and Tyler developed their analysis of the management of everyday life into a larger-scale research project, which examined the managerialist colonization accomplished by lifestyle magazines (Hancock and Tyler 2004), and they also worked as the editors of the book *The Management of Everyday Life* (Hancock and Tyler 2009). In the book, they elaborated on the examples mentioned in their 2008 article (see above), adding some further themes (e.g. the management of drug or alcohol use or the formation of one's retired identity), all of which they classified into the following areas: managing of our embodied living, managing our family life and managing our lifestyle and lifecourse (Hancock and Tyler 2009).

For the purposes of its analyses, present dissertation opts for a perspective in between the two described above – namely, the examination of either the corporation or management. Management as an institutional arrangement remains the unit of analysis, but it is narrowed down to one of its specializations, human resource management. According to my approach, HRM operates in the field of managing everyday life at the workplace, within the boundaries of the corporation. By everyday life I mean the Habermasian lifeworld concept, thus HRM practices – and especially its "soft" areas – serve the constitutive (rather than the regulative) control of the reproduction of intra-company symbolic resources, cultural knowledge, interpersonal relationships and personal identities. Yet we must not ignore the remark of Deetz that the boundaries of the corporation stretch way beyond the corporate cultural-interpersonal space and working hours. It is highly questionable whether it is possible to create valid knowledge, community relations and self-identity in a corporate institutional framework only, for the values, norms and personal competences formed in an organizational framework significantly contribute to shaping the undisputed, unconscious background of the economic sphere that serves as a resource in business decision making, in negotiations, in the setting of objectives and as an anchor point for economic law. In the next part, therefore, I will switch to the discussion of the critical approach to human resource management, and to the analysis of its colonizing power.

Part II: Critical Human Resource Management

II.1. Mainstream and Critical Approaches in Human Resource Management

Having introduced the research paradigm to be applied – the critical paradigm, that is –, I will now provide an overview of the management specialization my dissertation is centered around – human resource management, namely, as a field of science –, and position both critical human resource management and my own research within the field. The literature lacks a uniform definition for human resource management (hereinafter also referred to as HRM). Conceptual clarification as a topic was particularly popular at the time of the (real or presumed) transition from personnel management towards human resource management (for a summary in Hungarian see (Bakacsi et al. 1999; Bokor et al. 2007; Farkas et al. 2009; Szóts-Kováts 2006), which has lost its significance by now with (strategic) human resource management having become the predominant term (Kaufman 2008; Legge 2005). For the time being, until we return to the definition issues later in the chapter, let us content ourselves with the simple, brief and sufficiently general formulation of Boxall et al. that „HRM [is] the management of work and people towards desired ends” (Boxall, Purcell, and Wright 2008, 1). As far as the present thesis is concerned, thematic classifications of the knowledge accumulated in the field of HRM are far more relevant than historical ones, especially considering the pieces that incorporated the critical approach into their analyses – the discussion of which is what follows below.

II.1.1. Typologies in the Field of Human Resource Management

I decided to highlight three different typologies of human resource management as a field of science: the classification of Legge first published in 1995 in her book *HRM: Rhetorics and Realities*; the typology of Steyaert and Janssens from their introductory article in the 1999 special issue of *Organization* on HRM; and that of Boxall, Purcell and Wright in *The Oxford Handbook of Human Resource Management* from 2008. The reasons for my choice were that the first two studies already account for the critical trends, and that the 'how' of their classifications already carries a certain critically reflexive stance towards the field. The third study is, on the one hand, the most recent comprehensive overview of the field that I know of, and, on the other hand, handbooks from the Oxford series typically represent a true reflection of the areas of emphasis and the dominant streams in

their respective fields. It is therefore reasonable, I believe, to contrast the typologies of these three authors basically characterized by a critical viewpoint with the views of the most significant representatives of mainstream HRM. Below, I will first provide a comprehensive overview of the logic behind the various classifications, and then discuss the mainstream and critical trends separately, in more detail.

(1) Karen Legge (2006) did not aspire to systemize HRM knowledge as a whole, but to describe the two streams of theory-driven HRM research she had identified, relying to a great extent on her own work from 1995. The first, more dominant stream includes mainstream strategic HRM's American questionnaire studies, which are part of the typology of Boxall et al. (Boxall, Purcell, and Wright 2008), as well. The second is a critical stream mainly characteristic for Europe, which she first refers to as a critical-evaluative model (Legge 2005), but later, it is works based on post-structuralism and labor process theory that she lists here (Legge 2006). Finally, she outlines future research avenues, during which she argues that more critical and qualitative research would be needed, yet her argument is, confoundingly enough, that these might contribute to our understanding of the process through which HRM affects organizational performance (Legge 2006).

It is the first, mainstream trend that Legge (2005; 2006) devotes more attention to. She justified the imbalance pointing out that in leading North-American periodicals, scientific discourse is, for the most part, centered around research into the nature of high commitment / high performance work systems and their effect on organizational performance, building upon a positivist theory of knowledge. Notwithstanding her – undoubtedly significant – efforts in reflecting on theory of knowledge matters and in letting critical voices be heard, this decision of hers did not only align with, but also reinforced the power relations of academic discourse. The present thesis will not reflect the proportions of her study, yet I do think it is vital to introduce the two schools (*hard* and *soft* model) of strategic human resource management (hereinafter also referred to as SHRM), as it is one of these two models (the *soft* one) the effect of which on the reproduction of the lifeworld I intend to examine.

(2) Steyaert and Janssens (1999) set out to systematize HRM knowledge with a play of words as their guiding thread: their article is about human and inhuman resource management. The authors identified three discourses typical of the field of HRM: the discourses on theoretical, practical and critical HRM. The first two comprise the

mainstream, positivist discourses, while the third is the group of critical voices. Their main conclusion was that today's HRM lacks reflexivity, even critical studies were found to be less than satisfactory in this regard; consequently, they expressed the need to move forward towards a more reflexive type of human resource management.

(3) Lastly, the classification outlined in the editorial introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Human Resource Management* by Boxall et al. (2008) introduces some new aspects, yet it basically takes a positivist stance, as well. The handbook only includes one single critical realist study, which is a labor process theory based analysis of the HRM-employee relationship (Thompson and Harley 2008). Thus the editors of the handbook seem to be more receptive to critical approaches of the objectivist kind¹³. The authors (Boxall, Purcell, and Wright 2008) identified three major areas of knowledge accumulated in HRM as an academic field: micro HRM, strategic HRM and international HRM. Much like Steyaert and Janssens (1999), they reached the conclusion that the field is far too heavily dominated by universalist studies on best practices, with theory development still lagging behind. The remedy they recommend is, however, not an increased degree of reflexivity, but analytical HRM, which indeed suggests new research lines, yet never actually ventures beyond the boundaries of the positivist paradigm.

The classification by Boxall et al. also underlined that even though critical considerations related to HRM date back almost as far as critical management itself – a couple of early studies were, in fact, the forerunners of the latter (Cooper 1983; Fox 1990; Stablein and Nord 1985; Steffy and Grimes 1986) –, the reality is that the dominant discourse is still the positivist one (Legge 2005). It is thought provoking, in my opinion, that in spite of critical voices having found their own organs – like *Organization*, *Human Relations*, *Management Learning* or the separate Oxford handbook on CMS –, they still appear as a specialized field instead of being capable to generate a discourse encompassing the entire academic field of HRM, and hence set in motion the long-awaited process of reflection. Moreover, ever since the special issue of *Organization* mentioned earlier, critical analyses have, for the most part, been engaged with more general organizational matters, instead of focusing on HRM (Legge 2005). It needs clarification what processes this sort of isolation derives from, how far critical researchers themselves are responsible, and what

¹³ On the philosophy of science (objectivist and subjectivist) foundations of organization theories see (Burrell and Morgan 1979).

kind of role the internal logic of the academic publishing sphere has in it – the tendency for specialization of which should and could be criticized just as much as the tendency for specialization of HRM. It is a matter of fact, by all means, that the discursive spaces critical researchers have reserved for themselves – their periodicals and conferences, that is – obediently align with the mainstream culture of the publishing industry.

The analysis of Janssens and Steyaert (2009) brings us even closer to the very roots of the problem. As they point out, critical HRM works do not typically go any further than the sterile rejection of the mainstream paradigm. The authors, though not denying the necessity of such criticism, call attention to the risk that a discourse that implies a dichotomous world (mainstream versus critical, performativity versus anti-performativity), where criticism tends to thematize the employer-employee relationship in a very mainstream-like fashion – albeit using a crooked mirror –, will probably act to confirm positivist HRM research. This is a dilemma that my dissertation will have to face, as well. It is important to note, however, that Hungarian HRM research does not only lack truly reflexive, viable alternatives, but also those sterile critiques we mentioned above, an abundance of which has been published in the international scene during the course of the last two decades.¹⁴

Below, I will discuss the groups comprising positivist HRM streams separately, compare them with each other, and then switch to the critical streams in HRM.

II.1.2. Mainstream Approaches in Human Resource Management

Legge based her 1995 typology on the comparison of earlier normative HRM definitions, which lead her to identify two schools: establishing harmony with strategic objectives and planning is the focus of the first one, while the second puts emphasis on building an organizational culture that fosters high-level organizational commitment.

One of the SHRM schools is the *hard model*, associated with the **Michigan School** and characterized by instrumentalism and utilitarianism (Legge 2005; Legge 2006). The model makes employees appear as expenses, which need to be managed like any other resource, in a rational, impersonal way, striving to exploit them for maximum profit. To this end, HR policies, systems and practices need to be closely integrated with business strategies,

¹⁴ This is the place and time to give credit to the groundbreaking works that, though not having been expressly centered around it, but touched upon the topic of critical human resource management, contributed to laying its foundations in Hungary, and provided inspiration to this present work of mine: (Boda and Radácsi 1997; Bokor and Radácsi 2006; Csillag 2011; Fülöp, Hisrich, and Szegedi 1998a; Fülöp, Hisrich, and Szegedi 1998b; Gelei 2005; Gelei 2006a; Glózer 2006; Glózer 2011; Nagy and Primecz 2010; Pataki and Szántó 2011; Primecz 1999; Radácsi 2003; Szilas and Csillag 2008; Szóts-Kováts 2006).

in which case emphasis shifts to the 'resource management' part of 'human resource management' (Legge 2006).

The other school of SHRM – the one in the tradition of the human relations movement – , the *soft model (Harvard School)* does not regard the employee as a mere cost factor, but rather as a *valued asset*, which is capable of shaping the company's value creation processes in a proactive manner, and is hence a potential source of competitive advantage through the employee's commitment, adaptability and performance. The model, in line with the principles of developmental humanism, attaches importance to investing into the employee as a key factor of value creation. The two schools share the view that business goals and HRM goals need to be integrated (Legge 2005; Legge 2006).

The soft model of HRM incorporates the following policies: competence-based recruitment and selection, the extended use of communication channels, teamwork, personnel development, knowledge management, involvement in decision making and empowerment, creating a link between performance evaluation and the compensation scheme, etc. (Gelei 1999; Legge 2006). The model and its practices are based on the theory of high commitment / high performance work systems (Legge 2006), which considers the motivation and commitment of employees to be of key importance, and which builds upon employees' self-governing ability, their willingness to assume responsibilities and their internal motivation. What the model offers to companies is, in fact, a set of best practices that yield performance improvements, irrespective of the context.

The popularity of the soft model is in close connection to the appearance of quality-oriented production systems (TQM, JIT, lean), an integral part of which are high performance / high commitment work systems (Legge 2006) (in Hungarian see: (Gelei 1999; Losonci 2011; Makó, Illéssy, and Csizmadia 2008). The contribution of HR to organizational performance, and the consequences of HR practices in a more general sense have become key issues in both HRM and in neighboring fields of science (e.g. operations management, organizational development, see above). Research, for the most part, supports the universalistic hypothesis that the more high commitment / high performance work system related HR techniques the organization applies, the more its performance improves. However, Legge (2006) calls attention to what empirical findings have pointed out: the HPWS model is not particularly widespread, and it is primarily

applied by quality-oriented corporations, which rather supports the best-fit approach advocated by contingency theory.

It is not models any more, but characteristic discourses that **Steyaert and Janssens** (1999) talk about, one of the reasons for which, we might reasonably suspect, is their own methodological stance (qualitative, discursive, narrative analysis). The first discourse takes a **theoretical perspective** to HR practices, striving to find out *what HR has to do* in order to arrive at a workforce that is more satisfied and, above all, more productive. They aim at developing **normative models** of selection, performance management, compensation and training / development. From organizational psychology (e.g. motivation theories), they gradually switched to the resource-centered approaches of strategic management, and the development of competence-based HR systems emerged as the central topic. In spite of having incorporated this strategic perspective, the primary focus of these models is still the individual, and they strive to establish standards that employees perceive to be just and that, on the other hand, also yield an increase in individuals' contributions to organizational performance. These normative models meant to efficiently manage the individual do not, however, give sufficient emphasis to the structural constraints affecting the individual, and their efforts to induce reflexivity in the field remain insufficient, as well – reads the critique of the authors. It is this objection that they later based their introduction of reflexive HRM as a new avenue of theory development upon (Janssens and Steyaert 2009; Steyaert and Janssens 1999).

The second HRM discourse revolves around the **descriptive models** that intend to describe the HR practices that factually exist in organizations – that is, *what HR actually does* –, and examine the relationship between the organization's performance and its HR practices. As a result, a repository of best practices is established, which then serve as benchmarks for organizations. As an example, Steyaert and Janssens (1999) mentioned TQM-based organizations, the most suitable practices for which are, research suggests, offered by high commitment / high performance work systems. The purpose of **practical HRM** research is to deliver evidence for theoretical models, yet they are so deeply engaged in this meticulous task that they cannot distance themselves enough from the aims of HRM research to become reflective about them (Steyaert and Janssens 1999).

Legge and Steyaert-Janssens took different stances in their efforts to systematize HRM knowledge: Legge concentrated on strategic approaches only, and missed to distinguish

between theoretical and practical perspectives, while Steyaert-Janssens were less interested in the soft / hard distinction. Yet they both agreed that HRM makes the very same mistake whether it treats employees as resources or expenses: it neglects serious ethical and philosophical considerations, and consequently it lacks self-reflection; moreover, the commodification of employees acts to undermine human values (Steyaert and Janssens 1999). These tendencies deteriorate the credibility of the humanistic-developmental trend in HRM, which is one of the topics of the next subchapter.

The analysis of Boxall et al. organizes available HRM knowledge along different dimensions, and provides a more comprehensive picture of positivist HRM. The first area they identify is the so-called **micro HRM**, which includes HR policies and practices. Most studies are concerned with the tasks of the various sub-functions – like recruitment, selection, hiring, training and development, performance management, compensation –, as related to the management of individuals and smaller groups. Also, there are a couple of papers that deal with work organizations, the employee-employer relationship and employee voice systems (Boxall, Purcell, and Wright 2008).

The second area in the literature of HRM is **Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM)**, which is interested in the best fit between the above sub-functions, the environment and the organization's strategy (Boxall, Purcell, and Wright 2008). Indicators of the strategic status of HRM are: „appearance of the senior management perspective; the critical role of the function in improving corporate competitiveness; the function acquiring an integrative role” (Bakacsi et al. 1999, 47). Strategic HRM has, owing to its resource-based approach, strong ties to strategic management, and to industrial relations matters (Boxall, Purcell, and Wright 2008). The most important question of the strategic trend, apart from the best-fit issue, and also a central topic of current research is how HR activities affect organizational performance (Boxall, Purcell, and Wright 2008). The research community devotes much effort to demonstrate the positive effect of HRM on performance – without much success, some of the critics add (Keenoy 2009).

Finally, the third large segment of knowledge is **international HRM**, which is basically concerned with the HR practices and HR strategies of multinational corporations, and tries to adapt results from the previous two areas to international and intercultural environments. Its most important question is how the human resource strategy of the

(multinational) organization as a whole can be anchored into the given national environments, and to find those practices of the sub-functions that best fit the organization (Boxall, Purcell, and Wright 2008).

The above three areas had been evolving more or less simultaneously, yet Boxall et al. (2008) found that over-specialization had led to certain problems, and thus they proposed a new approach to HRM as an academic activity, which they named **analytical human resource management**. The most important task of analytical HRM is not the propagation of best practices, but the development of theories, the primacy of explanation over description. The fundamental elements of theory building are respect for context dependence, interdisciplinarity and the analysis of how HR contributes to the survival of the organization. A certain degree of interdisciplinarity has been present in HRM research before, yet the authors now call for a more conscious effort, encouraging the incorporation of findings from the fields of organizational culture theory and research and the science of organizational behavior, implying that development is better served by the blurring of boundaries than specialization. They furthermore believe that engaging in dialogues with strategic management, organization theory, economics, sociology, psychology and labor law might turn out to be fruitful (Boxall, Purcell, and Wright 2008).

Measuring HR performance with sophisticated instruments remains to be one of the most important tasks, which however must not make us forget about the plurality of HRM purposes (Boxall 2008). It is not only shareholders' interests that need to be taken into account, but the interests of employees and other social groups, as well, which provides social legitimation (Boxall, Purcell, and Wright 2008). The latter constitutes an important milestone towards a responsible HRM, but it must be noted that even though this recognition acts to integrate the achievements of macro-institutionalism (for details see (Walgenbach 1995), it still fails to overrule the instrumental mindset of functionalism. Legitimation is just as important for the survival – and not for anything else – of the company as is its compliance with economic rationality. Nonetheless, research into institutional isomorphism has found a possible reason for cautious optimism: an ever growing number of companies operating in the same operational space adopt quality-of-life programs in the workplace – even though this sort of homogenization diminishes the potential for competitive advantage, and despite the lack of a remarkable effect on organizational performance (Paauwe, 1996 In: Legge 2005). Whether this means the end to the utilitarian ethics of capitalism? Not necessarily. Not as long as we keep thinking

along the lines of macro-institutionalist logic, and not as long as pressure from the institutional environment is our only justification for ensuring more humane working conditions.

The above overview of the field of mainstream HRM serves for me to be able to clearly define the area which I aim to criticize in the dissertation.

First of all, I do share the opinion of Boxall et al. that human resource management cannot and should not be sharply distinguished from the neighboring fields of science, and that HRM matters are closely related to research into organizational behavior organizational culture and organization theory. Moreover, as already indicated in the first chapter, I do my best to interpret HRM issues in their respective social, economic and historical context, primarily relying on sociological theories.

Second, HRM will hereinafter stand for the humanistic-developmental stream that Legge referred to as *soft* HRM, and this is the HRM model my criticism will be directed at. My focus on *soft* HRM practices makes particularly relevant the consideration that the fields of organizational behavior (motivation, commitment), organizational culture and HRM shall not be dealt with as separate matters, for *soft* HRM aims at establishing a strong corporate culture and at increasing individual commitment, and it relies upon models of motivation, personality and learning in that. This is hardly a coincidence given that the emergence of the model was strongly influenced by organizational behavior and organizational development experts entering the academic arena of HRM, thereby replacing the *harder* trend of industrial relations (Kaufman 2008). Therefore my dissertation will, whenever relevant, rely upon pieces of research from these two fields, yet as my focus is on *soft* HRM, I will not provide a detailed overview of the academic fields of organizational behavior and culture.

My focus on the *soft* model is also justified by the fact that around the millennium, high commitment / high performance work systems have become equivalent to strategic human resource management, especially in America (Kaufman 2008). In spite of a number of critiques against the tendency, by British scientists for the most part (Kaufman 2008; Legge 2006), a large part of the past two decades' HRM definitions incorporate certain elements of HPWS, which do not only attach importance to strategic integration, but to a consensus with the employee, as well (for example (Guest 1997; Sisson and Storey 2000; Storey 2001).

In Hungary the field of management sciences has rather been influenced by American models. This is apparent in human resource management, as well, both from the oft uncritical enthusiasm for the newest management tools and from the primacy of the performance-focus over employee voice systems. Definitions in Hungarian human resource management textbooks (Bakacsi et al. 1999; Bokor et al. 2007; Farkas et al. 2009; Gyökér 1999) are far more restrained in emphasizing the universal validity of high commitment models, and rather underline the importance of internal and external fit, and of harmonizing individual and organizational objectives. They also devote attention to the hard and soft ways of operating the various HR systems, discussing the differences between knowledge-based industries and production-based industries. Nevertheless, *soft* HRM solutions tend to be presented as "advanced" practices, "new tendencies", as the paradigm of the future (Bakacsi et al. 1999). In that sense, the discourse on soft HRM in the Hungarian literature is one-sided, whereas some pieces of the international (British, for the most part) literature are expressly critical about the model. By opening a new, critical front in my thesis, I would like to contribute to drawing a more comprehensive picture of *soft* HRM for the Hungarian audience.

Third, I intend to contribute to both the theoretical and the practical discourse as identified by Steyaert and Janssens. The theoretical chapters, less surprisingly, present a theoretical criticism directed at the theoretical model of soft HRM. Whereas the empirical research, on the one hand, allows for me to join in on the debate about the practical implementation of humanistic models – that is: about the discrepancies between theory and implementation. On the other hand, it also enables me to examine the forms of resistance emerging in organizations against the aspiration – as suggested by the theoretical model – for total control over employees' thoughts and souls (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). My project differs from usual practice-oriented HRM research insofar as it is not the complexity of the relationship between HR practices and organizational / individual performance that I intend to develop a better understanding of, but rather the effects that *soft* HRM tools have on the reproduction processes of the lifeworld – which does include the impact on organizational culture, but goes much farther than that.

II.1.3. Critical Approaches in Human Resource Management

In this chapter, I will use the term 'critical' in a broad sense – meant to include any HRM-related writing that follows any one trend of critical management studies. First, I will provide an overview of the critical streams in human resource management identified by

Legge (2005; 2006) and Steyaert and Janssens (1999) in their aforementioned typologies. Next, I will outline the trends that appear to have been taking shape in the literature of critical HRM ever since, and how these relate to critical management theories in general. In her 1995 book, Legge presents the **critical-evaluative model** of HRM, without relying on a specific philosophical/sociological stream. Though she often makes references to post-modernism, her tone resembles that of Deetz's (1992) analysis of corporate colonization. Critical-evaluative approaches to HRM are based on analyzing *HRM as rhetoric*. They suggest that HRM is a cultural construction that provides an abundance of metaphors in order to redefine the meaning of work and the employer-employee relationship (Legge 2005). HRM creates a new meaning for employee experience, one that suits managerialist principles, with the purpose of achieving employees' normative commitment to the social status quo, where market value reigns over any other moral value (Keenoy and Anthony 1992; Legge 2005).

Legge outlines two scenarios for how HRM constructs employee identity. One of them is based on the argumentation of Guest (1990) that *it is the promise of the American dream that HRM principles carry* and the values of which they echo, and hence they create the obedient capitalist individual and legitimate managerialism. The other scenario is a summary of the views of Legge (1989b), Keenoy (1990) and Keenoy and Anthony (1992) on how HRM conceals the less-friendly side of the entrepreneurial individualism that Thatcherism brought along, and how it acts to make the threats of unemployment and intense competition tolerable. They uncover the contradictions of "*tough love*" as a rhetorical device frequently encountered in management texts. This expression is the concise form of *the internal tension in HRM*: that the organization needs to adapt to the market environment to survive, therefore organizational goals always come first before individual goals, yet good performance then again necessitates the commitment and the loyalty of the individual (Legge 2005).

According to Legge (2006), this very tension is what is beyond the differentiation between *soft* and *hard* HRM models. HRM strives to simultaneously build consensus with and extend its control over the employee, that is, to suit strategic business objectives. It outlines the image of an employee who is worthy of trust, but also a replaceable, disposable labor market commodity at the same time (Hyman, 1987 In: Legge 2006). As a result of this approach, the two kinds of HRM frequently coexist within the same organization: while the employees considered to have a key role can enjoy the advantages

of *soft* HR policies and empowerment, the groups on the periphery are treated according to the *hard* model's principles (Legge 2006), which situation is, as a matter of fact, explicitly formulated in the model of Sisson (1994 In: Legge 2005), generally regarded as a summary of the *soft* trend.

Differences in the treatment of the various groups of employees act to reinforce current power relations and differences in status, thus it is of utmost importance what criteria HRM professionals base the distinction between "valuable" and "less valuable" employees upon. Another question is, from a critical point of view, whether it is true empowerment and autonomy what the *soft* model is about, or rather explicit control turning into implicit control, manifesting itself in the form of self-discipline or peer pressure (Sewell, 1998 In: Legge 2006; Roberts 2007). Critical research tends to suspect that it is a pseudo-consensus only, backed by the ideological toolkit of *soft* HRM. By that, we have arrived at one of the points that the debate between humanistic and critical approaches is centered around – which will be enhanced with some additional aspects by the critical and empirical studies that Legge regarded as the second stream.

In her 2006 writing, Legge provides a taste of the **pieces of case study based research that relied upon labor process theory and the Foucauldian tradition** in presenting employees' perceptions about the teamwork, team spirit, flexibility and empowerment that accompany lean production, also touching upon the issues of subjectivity, identity and resistance. They query the assertion that lean production is the best possible method of operations management (Wickens, 1987 In: Legge 2006). In their eyes, the tripod of success is a tripod of subjugation, where flexibility actually stands for management-by-stress; quality for management-through-blame; and teamwork for management-through-compliance (Garrahan és Stewart, 1992 In: Legge 2006).

Rinehart et al. (1997 In: Legge 2006) underline the divisive impact of the peer pressure arising in the workgroup, and the labor intensification resulting from waste elimination expectations. Even though new work systems imply the promise of increased employee satisfaction, these phenomena point in the exact opposite direction. Having analyzed the process of peer pressure, Barker (1993 In: Legge 2006) reaches a similar conclusion, and presents the mode of action of *concertive control*. Workers agree on common values that serve the rationalization of production, yet they only keep to them because of the ever-growing level of peer pressure. Thus empowerment is only apparent.

From a Habermasian perspective, this means nothing else but that the system of distorted communication causes the reproduction of values to take place in accordance with the system's interests, the maintenance and the reinforcement of which situation necessitates further implicit control. We must not miss to realize that this apparently rationally motivated obedience is in fact empirically motivated (see (Habermas 1981)¹⁵, and maintained by the threat of being excluded from the group (and most probably from the job, as well). And this is the true message of critical research: to show that the democratic HR practices formulated in some sterile theoretical framework increase employee autonomy only rhetorically, whereas, through managerialist terminology and culture, control gradually penetrates the routines of everyday life, or as Habermas put it: „hide[s], so to speak, in the pores of communicative action” (Habermas 1981, 406). *To me, the interesting question is: how does the process that turns soft HRM from a humanistic-developmental approach into an oppressive ideology work?* Is this transformation a consequence of the inherent characteristics of the capitalist society? Is it possible at all that a workplace is truly democratic and capitalist at the same time? If so, what sort of changes does that demand of us in our roles as employees, managers, shareholders and consumers?

With reference to the linguistic turn in social sciences, **Watson** (2004) highlights that reality is not independent of the language that it is created by. He **urges us to get over with the hard/soft dichotomy** in order to prevent debates of the reality-versus-rhetoric type, which he considers totally irrelevant. According to Watson, the uncovering of reality (which is a tool of ideology critique frequently used in the present thesis, as well) and the contrasting of rhetoric with what is actually realized (which reminds of the Marxian distinction of false consciousness and false needs, as if the enlightened researcher would actually know what the true reality is) implies the presumption that workers are passive "cultural dupes" unable to resist the dominant ideology. *Soft HRM* in its pure form is impossible to implement anyway, says Watson (2004), as the primary preference will always be that the goals of the organization are met. Instead, he introduced the terms of high commitment HR strategies (see (Gelei 1999) and low commitment HR strategies, interpreted as **ideal types**, like Weber's bureaucracy. An ideal type never exists in its pure

¹⁵ The source of rational motivation is trust based on concurrence: I accept the other party's offer because I trust the validity of their knowledge and that they "are autonomous enough to warrant the fulfillment of the validity claims they made by communicative means" (Habermas 1981, 551). The source of empirical motivation, on the other hand, is the fear of punishment or the drive for reward.

form in reality, thus the practices of work organizations represent different points in the continuum between these two poles. As far as this dissertation is concerned, I stick with the hard/soft terminology. I do think however that Watson's proposal for the ideal type interpretation is worth considering, and it seems reasonable to henceforth use the term *soft HRM* in this sense. I still consider, nonetheless, the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality to be a relevant issue if, for example, an empirical study contrasts the rhetoric of the senior management of a specific organization with the reality experienced by the organization's members.

Steyaert and Janssens (1999) underlined that criticism in critical studies tends to be directed at both the concept and the practical applications of HRM. **Criticism against the conceptual construct of HRM** concerns that contradictoriness, two-facedness, changeability and uncertainty are all inherent elements of the conceptualization of HRM, for even the normative models' expectations of the employee are inconsistent: individualism and teamwork, commitment and flexibility, quality and flexibility, strong culture and adaptability (Legge 1989a; Steyaert and Janssens 1999). Regarding the **practices**, HR's experiments to manage corporate culture result in compliance and pretense rather than profound changes in values (Steyaert and Janssens 1999; Willmott 1993). These critiques, Steyaert and Janssens believe, are necessary, as they enhance reflexivity in the field by revealing the exploitive tendencies and false beliefs that pervade official HR texts. They do not, however, offer alternatives for the development of theories and constructive reflection, and what is more, by structuring their message along the (critiques of the) different HR systems, they fail to contest the logic of the dominant discourse.

The **Foucauldian analysis of HRM** applied in the book of **Townley** (1994) is already regarded as a better solution by Steyaert and Janssens. The starting point for Townley's analysis is that the individual is the product of power, created in the process of simultaneous objectification and subjectivization (Townley, 1998 In: Steyaert and Janssens 1999). HR practices may be interpreted as supervisory technologies that make the individual categorizable, measurable and systemizable (Steyaert and Janssens 1999). The Foucauldian analysis, according to the authors, is not criticism for itself, for its pointing out that things are not as self-explanatory as they look renders transformation possible and also urgent at the same time. This distinguished position is, in my opinion, somewhat relativized by the fact that both critical realist and critical theory based studies

tend to use this argument, namely that criticism always reflects the faith in the possibility of a better world.

In itself, the Foucauldian approach cannot warrant a sufficiently reflexive analysis of HRM, either. Steyaert and Janssens give a long list of reasons: Foucault devoted insufficient attention to individuals' agency, even though different individuals might interpret discourses in differing ways. Also, it should be taken into account how the individuals create, manipulate or, possibly, resist the discourse; moreover, the historical-social context needs to be incorporated in the analysis, as well (Steyaert and Janssens 1999). It is these deficiencies that the authors try to make up for through their concept of reflexive HRM.

The concept that had first appeared as **reflexive HRM** was later linked by the authors to the reconstructive reflection concept of Alvesson et al. (2008), and they have been urging the re-construction and the re-framing of HRM (Janssens and Steyaert 2009). Incorporating alternative paradigms, and marginalized research topics and political interests allows of the emergence of a "better" – in ethical, political and empirical terms – research practice, which brings back the employee into human resource management (Alvesson, Hardy, and Harley 2008; Janssens and Steyaert 2009).

Steyaert and Janssens (1999) **offer four ways** to make human resource management, as an academic discourse, reflexive. The first method, **genealogical analysis**, has its roots in the Foucauldian tradition and builds upon the initiative of Townley (1994). The genealogy – that is, the history of origin – of HRM concepts need to be explored so as to develop an understanding of the tradition and the system of assumptions they are embedded in (Steyaert and Janssens 1999). Historical analyses and conceptual clarifications, for example, are quite abundant in the literature of human resource management, yet these pieces concentrate either on the differences between personnel management and human resource management or on the development (in a modernist sense) of corporate HR as a profession and as an academic field (among others: (Bakacsi et al. 1999; Blyton and Turnbull 1992; Bokor et al. 2007; Farkas et al. 2009; Hall and Torrington 1998; Kaufman 2008; Legge 2005; Sparrow and Hiltrop 1994; Szóts-Kováts 2006). Instead of modernist analyses of development, we should rather explore the history of origin, the traditions and the system of beliefs beyond the terms 'human', 'resource' and 'management' (this latter one, for example, has its roots in the Italian expression for "training a horse" (Parker 2002, 7)). Genealogical analysis could assist in finding out how

the meanings we take for granted today have been shaped in the course of history (Steyaert and Janssens 1999).

The second method, **contextualized theorizing and re-reading**, requires the researcher, both when writing and when reading, to make themselves aware of and to make explicit the philosophical, ethical, political, cultural and historical context (Steyaert and Janssens 1999). What makes it different from the previous method is that it necessitates concentration on current social circumstances instead of a history of origin, and that it urges to re-interpret the writings of the past according to the relations of the present, to abandon our fixed interpretations (Steyaert and Janssens 1999).

The third technique is **contextualized storytelling**, which presents HRM as a field of local theories and local practices that are worth sharing and adopting, yet not as ready-to-use products, not as best practices (Steyaert and Janssens 1999). Human resource practices shall be depicted in dense descriptions and rich interpretations that reveal the process through which human resource management is being enacted in the everyday, and that provide insight into the world of employee experiences and meaning creation (Steyaert and Janssens 1999). This is the type of narrative description that Watson (2004) consciously used in his ethnographic research study to show what the human resource strategy building process of a family enterprise looks like in the everyday, and how personal interests, values and structural restraints interact and counteract each other. Rosen (1988) employed a similar method – though, being an earlier piece, obviously not as a result of a conscious choice – in providing a dense description of the Christmas get-together of a company in the advertising business, building upon symbolic interactionism as a theoretical foundation.

The fourth method is called **writing (in) the margins**; here, the researcher concentrates on the topics and phenomena that are typically not part of the dominant and/or ideal HRM discourse (Steyaert and Janssens 1999). When researching what is "human", nothing can be considered irrelevant, all aspects of human nature become important, especially the aspects that are excluded from one's life in the workplace or from the dominant discourse about it. Research into organizational humor (Plester 2009) or fragrances and odors in the workplace (Warren and Riach 2011) are examples for the sort of phenomena that might inspire the researcher to write (in) the margins.

The couple of typologies presented above already make it apparent that the differences between the critical approaches to human resource management reflect those between the various streams of critical management studies. I would like to highlight three major streams of HRM research: pieces based on labor process theory, on post-structuralism and on critical theory.

Studies based on **labor process theory** are associated with the group that call themselves paleo-Marxists (see the works of authors connected to Paul Adler (Adler 2007; Adler 2009; Adler, Forbes, and Willmott 2007) and Paul Thompson (Thompson and Harley 2008; Thompson and O'Doherty 2009; Thompson 2005). The majority of their studies examines the so-called 'de-skilling' hypothesis, which asserts that what (HR) management techniques are used for is to over-simplify and mechanize labor, and hence make it controllable (Peltonen 2006).

The **post-structuralist** trend is primarily associated with Barbara Townley (1993b; 1993a; 1994; 1998; Townley, Cooper, and Oakes 2003), and basically comprises works inspired by theories of French philosophers – that is: Foucault, for the most part (Costea, Crump, and Amiridis 2008; Deetz 2003; Finch-Lees, Mabey, and Liefoghe 2005; Knights and Willmott 1989; Messner, Clegg, and Kornberger 2008). They are concerned with the themes already discussed in relation to Steyaert and Janssens, so I will not repeat that. Both Legge, and Steyaert and Janssens devoted separate sections to labor process theory and post-structuralist pieces. Apparently, these two streams of critical analyses in human resource management could gather more momentum than the trend building upon critical theory, that is, upon the Frankfurt School.

It is the "classic" works of Legge (1989a; 2005; 2006) and Keenoy (Keenoy 2009; Keenoy and Anthony 1992; Keenoy 1990) that are usually considered to constitute the **critical HRM** stream (Steyaert and Janssens 1999; Watson 2007), yet these pieces rather bear traces of the Marxist critique of capitalism and ideology critique, without explicitly relying upon the works of either the first or the second generation of the Frankfurt School. Furthermore, they are a mixture of the analysis of the structural contradictions of capitalism and the elements of post-modernist discourse analysis. Thus I regard this set of works as a kind of forerunner, and rather link the appearance of the critical theorist trend (the word 'critical' now used in a narrow sense, in reference to the works of the Frankfurt School) to the analyses of Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott, and, partly, also those of Stanley Deetz (Alvesson and Deetz 1998; Alvesson and Willmott 1992; Alvesson

and Willmott 1996; Deetz 1992; Willmott 1993; Willmott 2005). This trend is less concerned with the methodical criticism of the functional subsystems of human resource management (recruitment, selection, career management, performance evaluation, training/development, motivation). Instead, focus is on topics affecting the workplace individual (or more precisely: identity) and community, that is, on research into the fields of organizational behavior and organizational culture (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011; Barros 2010; Costea, Crump, and Amiridis 2008; Fryer 2011; Gotsi et al. 2010; Kärreman and Alvesson 2004; Kärreman and Rylander 2008; Meisenbach 2006; Raelin 2011). Moreover, the works of the Frankfurt School, and especially Habermas, have also become popular in human resource development – often considered a separate academic field – and the closely related field of critical management education (Cappelletti and Baker 2010; Milley 2002; O’Donnell 1999; O’Donnell 2007; O’Donnell et al. 2003; O’Donnell et al. 2007).

An explanation for this very path of development might be that the mission of CT in management sciences has always been to shift attention towards symbolic and lifeworld phenomena, and towards the analysis of the system's impact on these. Research topics, consequently, do not emerge along the logic of the system, but from the symbolic domain of organizations, which is in accordance with researchers' preference of the qualitative methodology. In their eyes, organizational culture cannot be interpreted on its own, without its relations to HRM (Schuler, 1995 In: Alvesson and Kärreman 2007), as HR processes are absolutely key to the creation of organizational culture and of the *artefacts* bearing its imprints (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007). I do share this system of views myself, for it is exactly this dual focus on HR processes and organizational culture, on identities and the operation of communities/groups that the examination of the relationships between system and lifeworld necessitates. I believe, nonetheless, that examining HRM activities and their impact on the lifeworld using the analytical framework proposed by CT is a promising approach. And this is exactly what my dissertation contributes to through the Habermasian analysis of the *soft* – or high commitment – model of human resource management, presented in the following chapter.

II.2. The Habermasian Analysis of Human Resource Management

Willmott (1993) identified two major avenues for critical corporate culture research, which, I believe, can be extended to the entire field of critical HRM research, and which I will use as a guide in my Habermasian analysis of HRM. Thus the role of the

Habermasian social theory in my evaluation of the high commitment model of human resource management will be twofold. Willmott's **first major dimension** is the analysis of the historical conditions of the organizational phenomenon in question – now, the *soft* model of HRM –, which is the topic of subchapter II.2.1. I will scrutinize the conditions of emergence and the history of HRM in order to uncover its role in operating the capitalist system and in correcting its crisis tendencies. The **other major dimension** is concerned with the contents and the practical applications of the organizational phenomenon; Willmott (1993) also defined two subgoals here. *One of the subgoals* is to illuminate and assess the concerned theory from a critical perspective, which I intend to accomplish in subchapter II.2.2. I will look into how HRM practices – at least as far as their theoretical objectives are concerned – contribute to the reproduction of the symbolic structures of the lifeworld. The theoretical insights so gained will be applied to corporate Christmas subsequently, in Part III. The *other subgoal* is to empirically examine the real-world applications of the concerned phenomenon, which requirement will be fulfilled by the empirical chapter of my dissertation.

II.2.1. Historical Analysis of Human Resource Management

II.2.1.1. History of the Development of Human Resource Management

The history of human resource management dates back to somewhere around the late 1800s, parallel to the appearance of Taylorian scientific management. That was the time when HR departments – providing administrative support, for the most part – started to crop up, and when **HR as a separate position, initially called a welfare secretary**, was born. The First World War gave further momentum to developments, as the governments most affected by the war provided significant financing for the development of appropriate selection methods and for research into industrial fatigue. The process was further stimulated by the war-induced economic boom causing **employee turnover rates and wage pressure** to escalate, and by the spirit of the Bolshevik Revolution also invading the West, and acting as an incentive for the strike and union movements. (Kaufman 2008)

Thus the idea that the remedy for the labor market issues of the age would be the improvement of human relations appeared as early as the 1870s, and returned again in the '20s (Kieser 1995a). Employers had to devote attention to resolving **problems with discipline** and to establishing **welfare activities** in order to retain their employees, to

motivate them for better performance and to avoid unionization (Kaufman 2008), which is the root cause of the anti-union attitude of HRM. Contemporary statements, when subjected to close scrutiny, make it apparent that system-level anomalies were attributed to deteriorating commitment, the alienation of man/woman from their work and their fellow men/women, and the instrumental way of treating employees. A contemporary German entrepreneur, for example, wrote: „...man is not a piece of wood or iron, nor an ox or a donkey, whom you can just harness to draw any sort of cart, everyone has a heart and a soul ...” (Brunner, 1872 In: Kieser 1995a). This quotation reflects an important critical realization: man has become instrumentalized in the course of scientific-technological development (Alvesson and Deetz 1998; Habermas 1994c). The realization, however, did not lead to our liberation from under instrumentalism, but rather to employees' hearts and souls, in addition to their bodies, also becoming subjects of workplace control (Alvesson and Willmott 1996). It is this strategization of humanist ideas that is also manifest in the statement: „it is in our vested interest to keep our workers satisfied.” (Brunner, 1872, In: Kieser 1995a, 127)

Later, the wish was expressed, as well, to restore "the unity of the personality and the mass" – or, in other words, the unity of personality and the social self –, to make it free of conflicts, that is: to rid us of alienation. „In the first place, the management (...) establish relations such that the managed person does not at all perceive the dependence between the manager and the managed one as a form of pressure, and that they do not at all turn to the manager with their wishes. Mark my words: this is the way smart and wise parents do it with their children.” (Horneffer, 1922 In: Kieser 1995a, 129) Beyond this recommendation to management, they also suggest that the position of social secretary be established, and the related expectations are what the expectations towards today's HR originate in: „Ideally, this person shall neither be credulous nor overly philanthropic, not be a member of any union, and must possess a reasonable mind, a flexible, adaptable character, and the skills to act in a suggestive and impressive manner.” (Winschuh, 1923 In: Kieser 1995a, 129) Further proposals concerned the enrichment of work, group manufacturing and decentralization – all forerunners to later HRM solutions. It is these developments that Kieser (1995a) based his conclusion upon that the Hawthorne experiments were nothing else but the scientific legitimation of a pre-existing practice. Nevertheless, it must be noted that following the upswing of the twenties, HRM suffered a ten-year period of dramatic setback after the outbreak of the Great Depression in 1929.

Kaufman's (2008) explanation is that the recession, with its high rates of unemployment and low wages, acted to "solve" discipline and motivation-related problems. What might be called the process of regeneration of the HR profession was brought about by the **New Deal** of 1922, which **encouraged the organization of labor unions and introduced minimum wage legislation**. This lent new momentum to personnel programs, which were, once more, aimed at preventing labor unions from being founded. Should the union already have been founded, it exerted great pressure on corporations to standardize compensation schemes and job classification systems, and to formalize the rules of employment and their complaints management systems. In spite of all the system-level developments in HR, its primary task was to participate in **collective wage bargaining** with the unions. At the same time, the prestige of HR began to plummet, as workers lost their trust in HRM: to many, it became an empty promise, which only served to deliver the means of manipulating the workers (Kaufman 2008).

Around the Second World War, there were certain advancements in selection and training methods (Kaufman 2008). Between the Second World War and the mid-'60s, HR started to flourish, fueled by the desire to ferret out the secrets of the Japanese economic miracle, the appearance of large-scale corporations, the fetish of the "organization man" and the human relations movement (Kaufman 2008; Kieser 1995a). What gave the real boost for human resource management was the appearance of behavioral science theories. This was the point when the debates on definitions and nomenclature started, along with the exploration of *hard* vs. *soft* model differences and the struggle for a strategic role, which is already part of the present of human resource management (Kaufman 2008).

Thus, in summary, the **development of HRM** has been relatively slow and unsteady. It hit its all-time low during the economic crisis of 1929, when the labor market deprived the personnel staff of the key to solving the problems. It was the introduction of minimum wage rates and unionization that gave the most powerful impulses to HR, pushing employee satisfaction and motivation related problems back into the foreground. As evinced by the quotes from the '20s, the reason why the human factor was put into the limelight was the assumption of a positive relationship between satisfaction and performance. The ideological foundation of this argument is, given a basically humanistic attitude, the faith that the interests of the different organizational actors – the various *stakeholders* – can ultimately be reconciled.

Subsequently, I will argue that, **instead of actually working to reconcile these interests, human resource management rather acts to keep existing conflicts of interest latent.** Human resource management as a science and a practical profession has to face the very basic contradiction of capitalism that even though labor power is a commodity that is key to maintaining the production order that serves the interests of the dominant groups, the employee as an autonomous being is, at the same time, also inclined to oppose these interests and refuse to cooperate (Legge 2005). Relying upon the historical reports on HRM, I put forward the theoretical proposition that *the development of human resource management is a reaction to the crisis tendencies of capitalism. Primarily, it offers a solution for the motivation crisis threatening to disrupt work organizations' performance, yet it has been active in restoring the social legitimation of corporations, as well* (the corporate social responsibility movement has a more significant role in the latter). In elaborating on this argument, I will rely on the theoretical model of Habermas' work first published in 1973, in which he provided the sociological analysis of late capitalist societies' proneness to crisis.

II.2.1.2. Crisis Tendencies of Capitalism

Economic analyses are, for the most part, concerned with the crisis cycles of the economy, Habermas (1994c) however also distinguishes between the rationality and the legitimation crises of the political system, and the motivation crisis of the socio-cultural system.

His main thesis is that in order „to ward off system crisis, advanced-capitalist societies focus all forces of social integration at the point of the structurally most probable conflict – in order all the more effectively to keep it latent.” (Habermas 1994c, 66) Thus efforts are always being directed at the most current crisis: the appearance of the welfare state replaced economic crises with the rationality crisis of the public administration system, which trickles down to the political system as a legitimation crisis, finally resulting in a motivation crisis. According to Habermas (1994c), the root cause of these crisis tendencies is the basic contradiction of capitalism that socialized production serves non-generalizable interests. It is the descriptions of legitimation and motivation crises that seems relevant to assessing the history of HRM, thus I will provide a concise summary of these below.

Table 7: Types of late-capitalist crisis

Point of origin	System crisis	Identity crisis
Economic system	1. Economic crisis	--
Political system	2. Rationality crisis	3. Legitimation crisis
Socio-cultural system	--	4. Motivation crisis

Source: (Habermas 1994c, 76)

A **legitimation crisis** occurs whenever the validity of effective normative structures and cultural traditions is lost, and thus they become questionable. Consequently, the political system resorts to the ideological toolkit, to advertising techniques, which inevitably leads to failure. „There is no administrative production of meaning” (Habermas 1994c, 108), as the commercial production of symbols is unable to meet relevant validity claims (see chapter I.2.4). Habermas suggested that traditions can be reproduced either in a nature-like manner (e.g. folk legends), by developing our hermeneutic consciousness (e.g. the continuous re-interpretation of the Bible by the priests) or by the means of discursive criticism and reflexivity (e.g. rational debate). By strategically employing traditions, their conditions of reproduction – that is, the conditions of validity of communicative action – are violated, and hence the traditions are undermined (Habermas 1994c).

It is the recognition of the significance of discourses that the popularity of participatory techniques – which both the political sphere and the most recent HRM methods take advantage of – stems from (Habermas 1994c). For, after all, organizations need political legitimation just as well. Should the renewal of normative structures fail, and thus meaning becomes scarce, it will need to be substituted with financial value, by compensation (Habermas 1994c). „A legitimation crisis arises as soon as the demands for rewards conforming to the system rise faster than the available quantity of value, or when expectations arise that cannot be satisfied with rewards conforming to the system.” (Habermas 1994c, 113) For example if an employee sees no meaning in their job, increasing their overtime pay and benefits might work as a solution until the point when the employee says „they couldn’t pay me enough to work more.”

In the socio-cultural system, the legitimation crisis manifests itself in the form of a **motivation crisis**. Motivation is required to maintain, on the one hand, citizens' loyalty and, on the other, their performance in the employment system. If the resource of meaning is exhausted, citizens will experience a lack of motivation (Habermas 1994c). This lack

of motivation is relevant to our analysis of human resource management as far as socialized work and the education system are concerned (ignoring motivations for consumption and leisure).

The employment system, built upon the education system, abides by the performativity principle, the motivation patterns for which are provided by citizens' utilitarian value orientations and religious traditions (see the analyses of the heritage of protestant ethics by Weber (2005a) and Fromm (2002)). The problem of late capitalist societies is that they are unable to reproduce these values, and the changes in the social structure undermine the value of private ownership and performativity (segregation in school, questioning equality and the fairness of market competition). The relationship between formal education and professional success turns weaker, monotonous and fragmented work processes become widespread, and individual performance, in certain work processes, is more and more difficult to measure. All these do not support the development of a professional identity and of the feeling of membership in the professional community, undermine the intrinsic motivation for performance, which is replaced by an instrumental attitude towards work. Because of the lack of intrinsic motivation – with the lack of meaning in the background (Sievers 1986) –, an extrinsic source of motivation becomes necessary, supported by external constraints. It constitutes an external source of motivation if and when competition in the labor market exercises sufficient pressure on the employee or if the income differentials between the various groups of employees and the inactive population are sufficient in extent. (Habermas 1994c)

II.2.1.3. Human Resource Management as an Attempt to Solve the Legitimation and Motivation Crisis

This theoretical framework points us towards re-interpreting the development history of HRM as **HR topics' coming to the fore being a sign of the motivation crisis, and partly also the legitimation crisis, turning acute**. As evinced by Kaufman's (2008) analysis, external sources of motivation function well in times of economic crisis; that is, during the Great Depression of 1929, when the labor market acted to solve problems of loyalty and discipline, the development of the field of HRM experienced a great setback. The introduction of the minimum wage, that is, the appearance of the welfare state re-locates the epicenter of the crisis, the trickle-down process described above is set in motion, and acts to surface the crisis of the socio-cultural system. The appearance of labor unions is the manifestation of the conflict of interest between the social groups participating in

production, the keeping latent of which conflict is the job of HRM, through various counter-union maneuvers and welfare functions. These latter efforts provide the material compensation that serves to maintain the legitimation of the company (and the HR department, the HR profession), while they presume – and at the same time, reinforce – the instrumentalization of work.

Thus HRM *either* tries to make up for the lack of extrinsic motivation through performance related pay, motivation schemes and disciplinary mechanisms (see analyses on panopticism, e.g. (Townley 1993b; Townley 1994), *or* strives to restore missing/instrumentalized intrinsic motivation (that what originates in work itself) via its humanistic-developmental program. In this latter case, HRM's effort actually serves to eliminate the lifeworld pathologies caused by its colonization by the system. As Alvesson and Willmott noted: „Current talk of business ethics and the strengthening of corporate culture to facilitate empowerment, trust and teamwork can be seen as a – largely synthetic – system response to its own corrosive effects upon lifeworld values and practices.” (Alvesson and Willmott 1996, 106) Hancock (1997) formulates a similar idea when drawing the conclusion of his analysis of the analogies between organizational citizenship and the feudal system: the new type of managerialism reacts to the problems of modern societies by manipulating the symbolic sphere.

Habermas, seemingly in contradiction with the above statement, believes that "organizations gain autonomy through a neutralizing demarcation from the symbolic structures of the lifeworld; they become peculiarly indifferent to culture, society, and personality." (Habermas 1981, 403) Thus in organizations, systemic coordination is dominant, the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld is secondary, in fact, it happens outside the walls of the company. This is inferred by the differentiation between work and private life or work and family, and by experts averting responsibility for unpleasant tasks – say, layoffs – by saying "I'm only doing my job". That is, Habermas relies on Weber's model of bureaucracy, which underlines: the world of work is strictly separated from people's private spheres, the rational organization eliminates all kinds of personal, emotional and irrational elements (Weber 1948 in Fleming 2005). Already the indifference of organizations to morality and social norms and the primacy of effectiveness and efficiency alone carry certain risks, which has not only been discussed by critical management studies, but in the literature of corporate social responsibility and business ethics, as well (Freeman and Gilbert 1988; Goodpaster 2007).

Both corporate literature and practice have, however, changed since the birth of the theory of communicative action: ever since they realized the importance of the „human factor” in the eighties, corporations have by no means remained indifferent towards the symbolic structures of the lifeworld. What is more, it was exactly the exploration and the shaping of organizational culture, human relations and personalities – that is, the symbolic structures of the lifeworld – that *soft* HRM practices set out to accomplish. The literature of motivation, leadership, group dynamics, organizational culture and socialization all call our attention to the enormous significance of these factors in corporations' lives. It is however questionable whether *high commitment models are capable of restoring intrinsic motivation, of creating efficient normative structures, and hence laying the foundations for the legitimation of the HR profession. Which one of the two will emerge as the victor in the course of the organizational reproduction of the lifeworld: the orientation of communicative action towards mutual understanding or the instrumental attitude of purposive-rational action?* For it is only in the first case that the meaning born by our traditions can be preserved. The second case represents a fresh wave in the colonization of the lifeworld, during which the functions of communicative action will be quietly surrendered to purposive-rational action.

II.2.2. The Role of Human Resource Management in the Reproduction of the Lifeworld

To the advocates of the critical approach, the question raised above is clearly a rhetorical one, as it has been shown by a multitude of studies that *soft* HRM practices, as a matter of fact, serve to conceal control mechanisms, and that even humanistic values become strategized in the corporate space (Alvesson and Deetz 1998). To begin with, the social legitimation and credibility of *soft* HRM practices is undermined by the fact that their application is only recommended in conjunction with a development or quality-oriented strategy and/or for white-collar employees, and that in times of economic crisis, HR activities tend to "withdraw". As if the human values embraced by HR were not universalistic, were not available to all the employees and should only be followed under certain circumstances. Alvesson and Willmott (1996), for instance, point out that the implementation of TQM and BPR systems, which emphasize *soft* HRM issues and empowerment in the workplace, does not take place along a mutual understanding, but is very much a question of power: the change process is under top-down control, and senior management has a wide and varied range of tools at its disposal to break down

organizational resistance. But meaning, cultural worlds of meaning, as Habermas reminds us, cannot be reproduced by way of concealed or open power, corporate propaganda is just as harmful for the lifeworld as state propaganda is. Thus subsequently, **I will apply the "management as colonizing power" metaphor (Alvesson and Willmott 1996) to human resource management, as a colonizing power.**

Even though Habermas treated the organization as a black box, and was not concerned with any potential tensions emerging at the interface of system and lifeworld within the organization, the theoretical framework he developed is still well-suited for the analysis of the reproduction processes of the organizational lifeworld. The concept '**organizational lifeworld**' has already been in use the article of Hancock (1997), and in the human resource development related publication of O'Donnell et al. (2007), which then again was also preceded by three related studies (O'Donnell 1999; O'Donnell and Henriksen 2002; O'Donnell 2004). In these works 'society', as one of the three structural constituents of the lifeworld, was exchanged first for 'community of practice', then later for 'community' only; while instead of 'personality', the authors rather used the more broadly interpreted word 'self'. A methodical elaboration of the concept of organizational lifeworld and a consistent explanation of its relation to the Habermasian concept of lifeworld was, however, missing from their work.

One thing we must not forget is that there is no sense in analyzing the organizational lifeworld without the social context. The boundaries of the organization are diffuse: organizational culture, the organization as a community and organizational identity cannot be interpreted irrespective of the interpretive patterns, the legitimation order and the available identity repertoires that stretch beyond the boundaries of the organization. Nevertheless, modernity has created the pluralism of particular lifeworlds, where each organization represents a unique lifeworld (O'Donnell and Henriksen 2002). The task of HRM is to establish a repository of knowledge, a system of norms and a self-identity that are valid within the framework of the corporation, that is, to create the specific contents of the structural components of the organizational lifeworld through corporate socialization processes, team building and culture building. Thus in order to introduce the concept of organizational lifeworld, below I will provide an overview of those pieces of the critical organization theory literature (without striving for completeness) that are concerned with the three structural components of the lifeworld – culture, society and personality – and take an intra-organizational perspective.

II.2.2.1. Workplace Culture in a Habermasian Approach

The literature of organization theory makes a distinction between organizational culture and corporate culture (Brewis 2007). The two expressions cover two differing stances in philosophy of science. Corporate culture reflects the objectivist and, as a matter of fact, managerialist assumption that the organization *has* a culture. Culture is one of the variables that characterize the organization, which can be managed and "built" just like any other production process. The managerialist literature of **corporate culture** gives managers advice of the 'how to' type. This point onwards, I will use this expression, in line with the proposal of Brewis (2007), when discussing the interpretation of management-led cultural planning initiatives.

The use of the expression '**organizational culture**' is more typical of pieces inspired by constructivist anthropological works, and reflects the view that culture is something that organically develops and emerges in a community. The orientation of this approach is much more towards understanding rather than planning, basically seeking the answer to how the coordination of separate individuals' actions is accomplished. In fact, the organization *is* a culture; even seemingly objective organizational processes (e.g. recruitment / selection) are actually cultural ones – transmitting values, beliefs and norms (Brewis 2007).

The critical approach directs its critique primarily at the corporate culture building efforts of HRM. To the quick-paced propagation of **corporate culturism**, Willmott (1993) reacted with a detailed analysis of the phenomenon. He regarded corporate culturism, soft HRM and TQM as synonyms, as common efforts that contribute to the symbolic control of organizational life. The major question of critical culture research is, according to him, how corporate culturism facilitates the colonization of the emotional domain by management control. In his analysis, he used Orwell's *1984* as an analogy, and presented how „doublethink“ (e.g. not believe in corporate values but still be motivated), „Newspeak“ (e.g. three-letter acronyms) and „crimestop“ (e.g. loyalty as a universalistic norm) appear in corporate life. The goal is to gain control over any potentially disrupting values that employees might bring along from outside the organization (Alvesson and Willmott 1996).

Relying upon Weber's concepts of purposive rationality and value rationality, he argues that corporate culturism acts to also extend purposive rationality to the domain of emotions and thoughts. If rationalization is the disenchantment of society through

bureaucratization, then corporate culturism aims at the re-enchantment of life in the workplace. Willmott (1993), however, points out that the two processes – bureaucratization and the shift towards human relations, namely – do not necessarily differ. Corporate culturism is the expansion of the domain of purposive-rational action through the creation of monocultures where the conditions of development of value-rational action – that is, the discursive assessment of the meaning and the value of competing value-stances – are being systematically disrupted. Willmott's argumentation can easily be adopted into the Habermasian theoretical framework, what is more, the concept of communicative action is far more appropriate for exploring the processes of cultural colonization. Monoculturalism hinders the fulfilment of the validity claims associated with communicative action and creates a system of systematically distorted communication.

Thus **critical organization theory proposes a new relation between the concepts of organization culture and corporate culture** and their respective attitudes. Clearly, it is the organizational culture approach that fits the concept of a lifeworld that is reproduced spontaneously, while the corporate culture approach represents the colonization of the cultural component of the lifeworld by management. Organizational culture is the manifestation of the cultural knowledge, interpretive patterns and value orientations of an organization that is reproduced in an organic fashion, through undistorted communicative action. Whereas corporate culture programs are the means of the structural violence exercised by the system over the lifeworld, which results in the role of communicative action in the reproduction of the lifeworld being taken over by strategic action. For corporate culture building is, typically, a top-down process loaded with power and executed in accordance with the interests of a small group, and thus it fails to meet the conditions for the communicative reproduction of the lifeworld (orientation towards mutual understanding). Furthermore, the purpose of corporate culture programs is to establish an efficient system of values, norms and interpretive patterns that facilitate the fulfilment of the organization's (economic and legitimation-related) objectives as set forth in its business strategy. Thus in corporate culture building programs, the process of cultural reproduction is dominated by concealed strategic action.

The main character in this process is human resource management, which as a function is a transmitter of colonizing power: it substitutes the consensual orientation of communicative practice with the rules of instrumental utility. Deetz (2003) referred to

HR professionals as a symbolic elite (in the Bourdieuan sense), for they act to reinforce the concealed forms of domination in the workplace by shaping the values, actions and meanings. HRM has an interest in the "cultural industry", and supports the functional operation of the system via a special, humanizing form of control, which is based on regulated will and inconspicuous supervision (Deetz 2003).

II.2.2.2. Workplace Communities in a Habermasian Approach

The most frequently used unit of analysis in organizational communities is the group. Also, the entire organization itself may be regarded as a group of groups, or as a *team*. The type of dual conceptual framework presented above in reference to culture can also be applied to the analysis of groups in the workplace, depending on whether we take a positivist or a constructivist approach. One might make a distinction between formal and informal groups (Bakacsi and Bokor 2002). The informal group is a social unit that is formed organically within a given community and that caters to members' need for affiliation (Bakacsi and Bokor 2002; Contu 2007). Formal groups are called to life by the organization (Bakacsi and Bokor 2002); one type of them is the *team*. A *team* is a group of a small number of individuals, where members mutually depend on each other and possess complementary skills, which they all mobilize in order to achieve a common purpose (Katzenbach és Smith, 1993 in Contu 2007). Team members' work yields collective work products, and they hold themselves mutually accountable (Katzenbach és Smith, 1993 in Contu 2007).

The discourse on **teamwork** has become more and more intense with the appearance of JIT, BPR, TQM and lean systems (McCabe és Black, 1997 in Learmonth 2009). The most important role of *teams* in improving organizational performance, according to the mainstream literature, can be expressed along the dimensions of motivation, flexibility and learning (Contu 2007). This is the time when self-governing workgroups and work systems built upon participatory techniques and empowerment entered the stage, all of which relied on the intrinsic motivation and the high commitment of employees, and strived to turn learning into a part of everyday routine (Bakacsi et al. 1999).

According to the constructivist approach, however, learning as a social phenomenon is not limited to *teams* only, thus it would be worth concentrating on **communities of practice** (Contu 2007). The members of communities of practice jointly perform some sort of special activity or task (Lave és Wenger, 1992 in Gelei 2002). These communities are organized informally, in an organic way, and in the course of their joint activities,

members build a common, collective identity (Contu 2007; Gelei 2002). They share a special terminology, create *artefacts* with cultural meanings and preserve stories that lend meaning to the activities they pursue (Contu 2007).

Critical approaches are particularly critical about the discourse on *teams* and teamwork, which influences collective identity construction and substantiates existing power relations in the workplace (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Learmonth 2009). Though the mainstream literature depicts teamwork as a neutral and apolitical management technique, it often leads to peer pressure and self-discipline (see chapter II.1.3). Knights and McCabe (2003) rely on Foucault's concept of governmentality in showing how teamwork acts to press individuals into the service of organizational goals by mobilizing their need for autonomy, unity, enriched work and affiliation. The seeping in of the *teamwork* discourse into everyday conversations acts to colonize the thoughts and the souls of the subjects of the discourse (Learmonth 2009). This sort of colonization has a twofold mechanism of action. First, depicting organizational reality as teamwork implies that the organization's and the individual's goals are compatible, and that they all fight on the same side (Fox, 1966 in Learmonth 2009), and thereby excludes any other interpretation of organizational reality (Learmonth 2009). Second, talking about *teams* is a means of identity regulation: individuals construe their social memberships along managerialist interests (see communities of practice above) (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Learmonth 2009). Part of the connotative meaning of *team* is collaboration, sociability, comradery and commitment (Mueller et. al., 2000 in Learmonth 2009), which can easily be used in self-narratives (Learmonth 2009).

Team-related organizational practice includes **team building**, which also has a potentially colonizing effect on the organizational lifeworld. The formal part of team building influences the formation of intra-group (moral) commitments, collective identities and legitimate interpersonal relations by taking control of the learning process. Its colonizing effect might be furthered by team building events frequently taking place outside of the workplace, and almost "compulsorily" comprising some form of informal gathering after work hours. It encourages co-workers to jointly pursue activities that are otherwise typical of informal communities, and hence enables them to forge stronger ties¹⁶ with each other.

¹⁶ According to Granovetter (1973), the strength of the tie between two individuals is determined by the amount of time spent together, emotional intensity, intimacy (mutual trust) and reciprocity (mutual interchange of favours). Strong ties are typically formed within a circle of friends, while co-worker relationships are far more characterized by weak ties. The most important conclusion of Granovetter is that

O'Donnell et al. (2007) underline that social relationships with strong ties are far better-suited for the "healthy" reproduction of the organizational lifeworld. Whereas teamwork, which in fact is the completion of temporary and impersonal work assignments, is a manifestation of weak ties (Sennett, 1998 in Learmonth 2009), with members' relations to each other being governed by purposive rationality. Therefore, though its rhetoric suggests otherwise, teamwork may induce the erosion of the lifeworld. At the same time, team building – and especially its informal part built on "sharing a table" (*communitas*) and entertainment – fosters the very strengthening of ties, and therefore interferes with the social reproduction process of the lifeworld. I argue that this governed reproduction of social relations does not act against, but rather in favor of the colonization process. That is, the reproduction of the lifeworld happens according to the interests of the system, just like when a strong organizational culture is built.

II.2.2.3. Workplace Identity and Motivation in a Habermasian Approach

The critical approaches of individual motivation and personality theories question the taken-for-grantedness, the objectivity of needs and personality traits, and rather prefer the concept of identity, which regards the self as something that is constantly changing, constantly "becoming" (O'Doherty 2007; Roberts 2007). First, I will discuss the potential colonizing effect of the motivation discourse, and then present HRM as a potential means of identity regulation.

Sievers (1986), much like Habermas, highlighted the exhaustion of the resource of meaning as the most important problem modern work organizations have to face, and formulated the hypothesis that management sciences only began to attach importance to **motivation** after the meaning of work had been lost. In Sievers's (1986) eyes, the motivation theories serving as a cornerstone to *soft* HRM were nothing more than scientific inventions that management practice used as a substitute for the lost meaning of work. Theoretical research driven by pragmatic interest is being crowded out by applications dominated by technical interest, which leads to the disappearance of the initial humanistic attitude, and acts to reduce organizational reality to a frame of reference of satisfaction and efficiency (O'Doherty 2007; Sievers 1986). Thus (intrinsic) motivation has become the new vehicle of influence and manipulation, adequate for replacing the open exercise of power and external restraints (Sievers 1986).

weak ties increase the frequency of inter-group contact, and hence they are more relevant to building a network of relationships.

Thinking in existentialist terms, Sievers asserted that self-actualization will only be possible if the modern individual will once again become capable of facing its mortality, and thus cease to eliminate their existential fear by becoming one with the seemingly immortal corporation. Death having become a taboo may also be traced back to the questioning of the worldviews offered by our religious traditions, which cannot provide a valid frame of interpretation for the fundamental issues of life anymore (see (Kieser 1995b). Christmas is the festivity about facing our birth and our temporality, facing the eternal circle of life, and thus I expect our analysis of corporate Christmas to enhance our knowledge about organizations' meaning-creation processes.

The rituals, ceremonies (e.g. a promotion procedure or some corporate event) and symbol systems generated by HR assist the members of the organization in overcoming their existential fear and uncertainty (Hancock 1997). HR provides cultural meanings and symbols, modes of self-presentation for individuals' identity construction, as a result of which it functions as a regulator of identity (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007). „**Identity regulation** encompasses the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction.” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002, 625)

Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) identify two tools that convey the power of HRM as a regulator of identity – or, in Habermasian terms, as a colonizing power. One of them is excess ceremoniality, which implies that the key importance of the scenarios of HR processes that support "rational" decision making originates in their symbolic meaning rather than their role in ensuring organizational efficiency. These ceremonies serve to reinforce employees' "holy faith" in the specialness of the corporation – which specialness somehow spreads out to permeate the employee as an individual (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007, 718). The other tool is the so-called aspiration control which acts to tie the self, through the cultural meanings provided by HR, to a desired career path and a prescribed identity project. The individual's organizational life is full of uncertainty – yet HRM comes to the rescue by structuring, supporting and, at the very same time, restricting their identity project. HR delivers patterns to cope with the complexity of the world by, for example, defining the scope of activity of juniors and seniors; by providing the individual with a set of cultural competences to guide them along their career path; and by laying down the rules of normative order within the organization.

II.2.2.4. Summary

By the Habermasian analysis of human resource management, I would like to call attention to the point that the solutions offered by soft HRM for the motivation and legitimation crises that modern societies suffer from are dangerous instruments, and potentially have a colonizing effect on the organizational lifeworld. The efforts of the *soft* model of HRM all pursue the central purpose of organizational efficiency and effectiveness, that is, they actually aim at establishing the systemic coordination of the organizational lifeworld. While the reproduction of the lifeworld ideally takes place spontaneously, through communicative action between equal partners, the sole purpose of which is mutual understanding, the HR processes of the organization are driven by the objectives set forth in its business strategy, and the legitimation basis of mutual understanding (that is: consensus) is the contribution to organizational efficiency. Furthermore, the equality of those participating in the communication is questionable, as organizational values, for example, can hardly ever be reflexive. This means that HR practices generate processes in the organization that resemble the reproduction processes of the lifeworld, and make them appear as undistorted communicative action. These processes take over the reproductive functions of communicative action, but they do so in behalf of the system's interests, thus it is reproduction itself that comes to bear a functional value: the various forms of purposive-rational action are draped in the guise of communicative action, and hence what is 'given' appears as 'possible', a 'compromise' appears as a 'consensus', and 'necessity' as 'freedom'. The organizational lifeworld that has been colonized will not be reproduced spontaneously, by communicative action, but rather in a governed fashion, by strategic action – that is, by the means of human resource management techniques.

Part III: The Critical Analysis of Corporate Christmas

III.1. Corporate Christmas as a Subject of Critical Research

The hardest and most frustrating one of a researcher's tasks is to define an exact and well-focused research topic (Thomas 1993). The job of the critical researcher is particularly difficult, as they concentrate on phenomena that are hidden beneath the surface (Thomas 1993). In the present case, the task is to operationalize the colonizing effect of HRM on the lifeworld. In order to do so, it is advisable to first find a well-delimited HR function or HR activity, the effects of which then I will be able to analyze within the framework of Habermasian social theory. My choice fell upon the analysis of the corporate Christmas parties organized by the HR department. The primary reason to do so was the re-interpretation of the meaning of Christmas in modern capitalist and consumerist societies, which alone makes Christmas an exciting research topic.

People typically celebrate Christmas with their relatives, and embedding this shared holiday into a corporate setting clearly creates issues with work-life separation. It is the symbolic blurring of this very boundary that Fleming (2005) describes in his criticism of the so-called fun culture. Fun culture aims at creating a corporate atmosphere where employees experience more fun, joy and playfulness during their daily jobs through informal clothing, office parties, training camps, humor and joking (Greenwich 2001, Reeves 2001, in Fleming 2005). The goal is to symbolically displace the traditional boundary between work and non-work related experiences, as Fleming points out. This boundary has never been impenetrable, of course, but this holistic approach of HRM requires a much stronger existential self-representation of the individual, which a part of the employees react to with cynicism, in spite of the positive expectations suggested by the literature (Fleming 2005).

Corporate Christmas is an occasion, too, an important element of which is experiencing entertainment and joy in the workplace community. As a holiday that carries both ritual and symbolic elements, it has an important role in the reproduction of the lifeworld: in the renewal of the interpretative set that the traditions carry, the reinforcement of social belonging and in individual identity construction. I am interested in **how the traditions and the symbolic system of Christmas change if and when they are brought into a corporate setting by human resource management**. For my assumption is that the use of Christmas as a strategic tool violates the conditions for reproduction of its world of meaning, and turns it into an empty phrase (see (Habermas 1994c).

III.2. Christmas as a Social Holiday

Being a holiday, Christmas breaks the everyday routine of things and carries symbolic significance, and thus, paradoxically, has a particularly important role in the renewal of everyday corporate life. A holiday divides the continuous whole into segments and renders the everyday repetition of things more comprehensible (Hanák 1999). **Christmas is a cult holiday, and those in power have always strived to shape related traditions according to their own agenda.** The Christian Church aligned the celebration of the birth of Jesus with the winter solstice, thereby sanctioning existing pagan traditions (Bálint 1973). This was the „archaic-magical fundament that the mystical-liturgical world of Christianity layered upon” (Bálint 1973, 11). There is a large number of traditions associated with Christmas Eve and Christmas Day that actually have their roots in the celebration of the winter solstice, and which have an important role in today's post-secularization "Christmas industry", as well (Hancock and Rehn 2011, 741). Important elements are the birth of new vegetation and purification – cleaning and tidying up, preserving one's health, overcoming illnesses and death (Bálint 1973), coupled with the community's joy over the birth of the Savior and the importance of people's love for each other. Christmas time is also a time for reflection, as it indicates the end of the year as a cultic unit (Bálint 1973), and the birth of something new.

To modern Western societies, Christmas is a significant socio-economic event (Hancock 2013). A number of authors opine that Christmas was reinvented in the 19th century, which was also when it became a widely celebrated holiday (Hancock and Rehn 2011). Merchandise, objects and postcards specifically characteristic for the Christmas season appeared, and became the sacred tokens of love and respect (Marling 2000, In: Hancock and Rehn 2011). It was in the late 19th century that Christmas season turned into a period representing the essence of consumer society, characterized by uncontrolled shopping frenzy. It was around this time that companies started giving away Christmas bonuses – „sacred money”, as Hancock and Rehn (2011) refer to them. A good indication of the economic significance of Christmas is the fact that in 1939, President Roosevelt moved Thanksgiving to the last Thursday of November in order to extend the Christmas sale period (Hancock and Rehn 2011). Christmas tends to be an official holiday in Western societies only, its impact is clearly global, however. For example, a great deal of the Christmas products sold in the Western world comes from China (Hancock 2013),

produced in a Chinese town, taking advantage of cheap labor working under poor working conditions¹⁷.

Thus Christmas is not just about the mystical-liturgical world of traditions, a feast of love and altruism, but also about costs and benefits, consumption, the heavy burden on the environment, overtime, accelerated production processes, the depressing year-end rush, inhuman working conditions and the burden of performance. Creating the „perfect” Christmas requires rational planning and organization, both from private individuals and economic actors. **Thus not even Christmas can escape rationalization:** even though Christmas apparently represents an alternative reality to our instrumentalized everyday lives, in fact it is the absolutely organic continuation of said instrumentalization (Hancock and Rehn 2011). The question is whether modern Christmas leaves any room at all for the contemplation, reflection and joy that, based on the rich world of traditions associated with Christmas, the media promise.

In spite of the above, Christmas has not been particularly popular with organizational scientists as a research topic, even though its economic significance could hardly be questioned, as Hancock and Rehn (2011) conclude in the introductory study of Organization’s special issue on Christmas. Social sciences, in a broad sense, treat Christmas as a serious and important area of research, yet with respect to organizational sciences – much like natural sciences –, it tends to appear as a source of humor only. The authors find no scientific justification for this lack of attention. They arrive at the conclusion that it is the lack vs. presence of support from the power structure of the branch of science in question that decides whether Christmas is considered a valid topic or not. **Christmas is, nonetheless, a research area that might provide insight into the process of how the domains of commerce, corporations and everyday life get intertwined, and create and reproduce each other** (Hancock and Rehn 2011).

III.3. Christmas as a Corporate Holiday

I share Hancock and Rehn’s view that Christmas is worthy of attention from a management aspect, as well. Not only because marginalized topics naturally attract the critical researcher, but also because Christmas is indeed a special period of the year from a manufacturing, retail and work organization point of view, too (Hancock and Rehn 2011). The colonization and managerialization of Christmas may be examined from a

¹⁷ <http://www.origo.hu/karacsony/mashol/20141220-a-karacsonyt-egy-kinai-varosban-gyartjak.html>.
Downloaded on: 15 January 2015

number of perspectives: consumption (Bartunek and Do 2011), the division of household chores (Vachhani and Pullen 2011), organization issues related to the holiday or the asymmetry of Christmas gift-giving in corporate settings (Lemmergaard and Muhr 2011). The present dissertation analyzes Christmas as celebrated by the workplace community with respect to its impact on the organizational lifeworld.

Concerning corporate Christmas, it is still the study of Rosen (1988) from nearly 30 years ago that can be considered the most significant one. **Rosen (1988) regarded corporate Christmas as a social drama or ritual.** He built his work on the theory of social constructionism, which focuses on the analysis of social interactions. Rosen conducted participant observation at an American advertisement company for nearly an entire year, also collecting data about their Christmas party. He employed ethnographical data analysis methods. Even though Rosen made no reference whatsoever to critical theory, his analysis can still be considered partly critical, given that he discussed at length how the Christmas party, with its seemingly informal nature and familiar atmosphere, contributes to the reinforcement and the reification of the power and bureaucratic status quo.

The explicit purpose of the Christmas party is for the employees to celebrate together, yet, beneath the surface, it also reveals the corporate ideology: the company delivers a moral, caring network of relationships to its employees (Rosen 1988). It is not only a workplace, but also a community where people receive love, where they can feel good and where there is space for the human dimension, as well, beyond cold rationality. Rosen drew the conclusion that, **through the combination of instrumental and moral relationships, corporate Christmas has created a new form of control** different from any of the pre-existing impersonal control mechanisms. The systematic cultivation and strengthening of such a moral community act to disguise the actual instrumental relations operating in the background (Rosen 1988). Interpreting Rosen's findings in a Habermasian framework, the new form of control he described corresponds to the colonization of the lifeworld: the use of tradition serves, via its influence on employees' identities and social relations, the legitimation of the system's operation.

Why are Christmas and related rituals so important in maintaining the company's power? – one might ask, drawing from Rippin (2011). On her quest for an answer, Rippin starts out by exploring the historical roots of the Christmas party. (1) In the Middle Ages, it was customary for guild members to celebrate together on the day of their guild's patron

saint. Rippin believes that corporate Christmas serves the reinforcement of unity and group identity in very similar ways. (2) The modern feast of corporate Christmas bears strong resemblance to carnivals and indulgences: it is characterized by chaos and excessive malleability. Corporate Christmas is the manifestation of seasonally approved indecent behavior, the world is turned inside out for this one night (Rippin 2011). **The carnivalesque nature of the Christmas party** was part of Rosen's description, as well: the everyday operation of the company was reflected upon in funny sketches and the corporate hierarchy was turned upside down (e.g. managers could become targets of all sorts of jokes). (3) And finally, the symbolism of the masks worn during carnivals and indulgences lives on in the Christmas headgear that is so popular in Anglo-Saxon countries. Rippin's analysis focuses on four types of such headgear: reindeer antlers, Father Christmas hats, tinsel halos and paper crowns. The wearing of such festive headgear has not become widespread in Hungary. Yet the same cannot be said of throwing corporate Christmas parties and filling them with carnivalesque elements, which is why I will now summarize Rippin's findings about these.

Rippin (2011) referred to the Christmas party as a **period of sanctioned misbehavior**: the company funds it in order to allow its employees to let off steam under controlled conditions. At the Christmas party, even the irregular, intemperate natural body becomes legitimate again. In everyday life, the ideal organizational body is disciplined, controlled and hidden beneath the workplace apparel. It is well-groomed, subject to medical examinations, sufficiently nourished, and submits itself to a diet if necessary in order to perform as expected. The natural body is, on the contrary, irregular, sometimes sick, unkempt and prone to indulging in excessive eating and drinking. The Christmas dinner, the consumption of alcohol and dancing allow the employee's body to escape its everyday ascetic prison cell. Order is, however, swiftly restored after this short absence of rules through the symbolic acts of indulgence: through tidying up and airing the occurrences of the party and the morning after. (Rippin 2011)

The re-discovered rituals of Christmas serve the purpose of creating meaning in an alienated workplace, which is why they are important to the legitimation of existing institutions (Rippin 2011). **Thus corporate Christmas can be considered an invented tradition** (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) created in response to the meaning of work having become lost in modern corporations. „Invented tradition is a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual and symbolic nature,

which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the (historical) past.” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, 1) Invented traditions were typically examined in their relation to the age of nation states, where the use of folk symbols was clearly politically loaded. The purpose only slightly differs in the case of corporations: it does not serve the building of national community and national identity, but to lend meaning to the workplace community and identity, and hence to create legitimacy for the economic system. That is, **the purpose of celebrating corporate Christmas parties is to lend meaning to the present corporate existence by borrowing the symbols and the world of meaning of past traditions.**

By seemingly opposing the continuous changes and renewal of the modern world, invented traditions strive to make at least a small portion of social life appear as permanent and unchanged (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The birth of modern consumer societies had been accompanied by the weakening of the social patterns related to Christmas, and therefore new traditions and customs have appeared, which, nonetheless, take advantage of the chance to refer back to bygone days. For the sake of flexible adaptation to market conditions, corporations are constantly reorganizing themselves, the structural environment is undergoing continuous changes, and employees are being replaced all the time, too. Corporate Christmas (and other rituals) provide fixed points for the employees to hold on to in this uncertain setting. The references to the past and the recurring elements all serve to create the much yearned-for feeling of stability (making one forget that even though the message is that it is the same community that celebrates together each year, it is most probably not the exact same persons).

Though Christmas rituals reenact pre-modern rituals, in the corporate setting they become empty, commodified experiences, states Ripplin. It is consumption that is at the center of corporate Christmas, instead of the preparation for spiritual attention and reflection – which, for example, carnivals were meant to prepare for before Lent. Thus according to Ripplin (2011) **Christmas rituals are secularized attempts to enchant the corporate world.** It is worth to recall at this point that Willmott (1993) used the exact same words to describe the aspirations of corporate culturism to counterbalance the disenchanting effect of bureaucratic control. It is on the same grounds that Hancock (1997) objects to the use of quasi-religious rituals and symbols to build corporate culture: even though this irrational enchantment indeed provides a sort of relief from the loss of meaning caused by excessive rationalization, at the same time it also forces another kind of dependency

onto the employee, targeting their subconscious this time. That is, in response to the problems of modernism, the corporation falls back on pre-modern, anti-democratic instruments in order to strengthen an irrational form of attachment to the dominance of instrumental rationality (Hancock 1997). **Corporate Christmas** acts as cultural doping (Alvesson and Willmott 1996) and **leads to the devaluation of the lifeworld** by promoting mechanisms of lifeworld reproduction that would otherwise be characteristic for lower degrees of social development, and which rely on unquestioned, subconscious patterns that hinder the activation of the rationality potential of communicative action. I will now proceed to the discussion of the methodology and the results of my empirical research into corporate Christmas.

Part IV: Methodology

IV.1. Research Objective and Questions

The purpose of my research is to explore the relationships between system and lifeworld within the organization, and the tensions and the manifestations of crisis emerging at their "interfaces" (Kemmis 2001). Corporate Christmas as a cultural phenomenon is one such node situated at the boundary between system and lifeworld. On the one hand, those organizational actors that are in a position of power strive to consciously manage corporate Christmas, while on the other hand, it is a phenomenon spontaneously shaped by community interactions. According to Alvesson (1990 In: Willmott 1993) one of the main objectives of critical research is to reveal how corporate culturism as a medium of domination – including the management of corporate Christmas – acts to extend management control. Concerning critical research, Thomas (1993) underlines that proving anything is beside the point, as the point is to examine if the given phenomenon – the colonization of the lifeworld through corporate Christmas, in our case – exists at all, and if yes, then to determine how it appears and manifests itself in the culture at hand. As concerns critical ethnography, he attaches particular importance to flexibility, as the most exciting questions seem to have a tendency to crop up after a substantial amount of data has already been collected (Thomas 1993).

I turned my attention towards the management practices that intend to shape employees' identities, community relationships and organizational culture through what we call corporate Christmas. I focused on how the organization's members interpret and perceive these management practices. The objectives that (senior) managers formulated in regard to corporate Christmas were treated as equally important. I worked on the assumption that it was not their personality, but rather the interpretation of managership as a social role that these objectives reflected.

My research questions concern the reproduction of the organizational lifeworld's symbolic structures, and the manifestations of crisis in the lifeworld:

- How are cultural meanings and norms, interpersonal relationships and personal identities reproduced in a corporation during Christmas time?
- How does power (organizational hierarchy and control) and money (profit imperative) affect these reproductive processes?
- Which crisis phenomena in the lifeworld can be associated with corporate Christmas?

In the course of the research, I noticed that employees apply a number of different tactics to oppose the managerialization of Christmas. Therefore – in accordance with the theory – I added one more research question:

- What kind of strategies and tactics do employees use to resist lifeworld colonization through corporate Christmas?

IV.2. Critical Ethnography

The nature of my research topic and research questions made using a qualitative methodology an obvious choice¹⁸. The phenomena I intend to examine are part of the everyday actions of the lifeworld, and there is a clear consensus in social sciences on the tools of interpretive sociology being the most suitable ones for the analysis of lifeworld processes. Critical organizational research, as well, tends to rely on qualitative research methodologies (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Convention, however, is not the only reason for using qualitative methods: the exploratory nature of the project and the intention of building (as opposed to testing) a theory also pointed in this direction, and so did the fact that the subject of the research were the personal experiences and the cognitive, affective and conative processes related to the everyday world of organizations, which can only be accessed using these methods. As Habermas (In A. G. Scherer 2002) notes, past things and the sphere of mere thinking can only be explored by qualitative tools.

For a number of reasons, those engaged in critical organizational research do not have it easy. One of the most important contradictions they have to cope with is that the greatest figures in CT – and Habermas was no exception – were not interested in empirical research (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000). Their philosophical inspiration and the drive to build theories acted to detach them from the less abstract world of empirical research (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). Moreover, their intellectual traditions alone can make critical researchers rather theory-driven; their heads are not "empty" when starting the fieldwork. While exploring the topics of repression, one needs to create a balance between their basic critical orientation (the political agenda implied by the theoretical background) and an openness and sensitivity to empirical data. Critical research endeavors to explore how cultural traditions (e.g. Christmas) and those in a position of power (e.g. the management)

¹⁸ For the fact that this statement of mine can be considered relatively self-explanatory, the credit partly goes to my colleagues who have already earned their PhD and laid the groundwork for the general acceptance of the qualitative methodology in the process, and from whom I have learnt a great deal: (Bokor 2000; Csillag 2012; Gelei 2002; Kováts 2012; Primecz 2001; Radácsi 2000; Toarniczky 2011; Szóts-Kováts 2013).

contribute to the freezing of social reality (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). It is characterized by questioning rather than confirming; by breaking rather than reproducing patterns; by revealing tensions rather than participating in the dominant discourse (Alvesson and Deetz 2000).

Critical (social and) management research is primarily driven by emancipatory knowledge-constitutive interest, an important element of which is that while it aims at a deep understanding of the everyday world, at the same time it also strives to set in motion a self-reflection process that could serve as the basis for changing the workplace (social) status quo (Habermas 2005; Kvale 2005; Willmott 2005). From a research methodology perspective, even though critical research also draws from hermeneutics (as regards its aspiration for a deep understanding and the primacy of interpretations) (Gelei 2006b) and phenomenology (as regards the primacy of the everyday experiences of the lifeworld's actors), it is still dialectics that its emancipatory knowledge-constitutive interest relies on most. Dialectics is the science of internal contradictions, which looks upon the contradictions between one's consciousness and actions as contradictions between the social and the material world. For example, a contradiction revealed in an interview will not be interpreted as a contradiction of one's personality, but as that between the social and economic domains of the everyday world (Kvale 2005). Change is driven by contradictions, while „people have an influence on the world, induce changes in it, and then in turn they themselves change, too, through the consequences of their actions” (Kvale 2005, 64). The dialectical approach does not presume the existence of a single coherent truth (e.g. the single true meaning of a text), but is rather interested in the ambivalence, ambiguity and inconsistency of its meanings (Kvale 2005).

There are two major trends in CT-inspired qualitative research: critical ethnography and critical-emancipatory action research (Duberley and Johnson 2009). The former one corresponds to the debunking / revealing purpose of CT, while the latter one is rather associated with transformative research. As already mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of the present dissertation is to unveil and unravel; namely, to provide an in-depth analysis of the colonization of Christmas by human resource management. Thus critical ethnography is the one that better suits my research purpose.

Based on Thomas (1993), Alvesson and Deetz (2000) gave the following summary on the critical ethnography approach. Researchers...

- focus their attention on the repressive aspects of cultural phenomena, that is, their choice of topic puts injustice, control and power (e.g. colonization) into the foreground;
- regard language itself as a vehicle for power, and they are skeptical to data;
- follow the principles of defamiliarization in interpreting the data, that is, they make the known appear unknown in order to facilitate outside-the-box thinking;
- reflect on the research process itself, as well;
- also pay attention to the wider relevance of the research, and strive to answer the question what kind of change (in emancipatory terms) the research induced in the world.

Ethnography in its critical form poses significant challenges for the researcher, for getting close to the natives is not the only important aspect, but they also need to take the time, both during and after data collection, to distance themselves from, and hence critically evaluate the data and their experiences (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). Therefore, the authors agree that instead of or in addition to the classic approach of ethnography – according to which one should spend at least one year in the field –, partial ethnography is an acceptable approach, as well.

Partial ethnography means that the researcher focuses on one given situation, which they explore to the greatest possible depth and detail. The organizational situation in focus might be a job interview, some organizational event or a decision making process limited in both space and time (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). This sort of strict focus allows for the report on the empirical data to remain open for different interpretations. Another example for such a well-delimited situation is corporate Christmas, the analysis of which, in my view, partial ethnography is perfectly suitable for.

IV.3. Sampling and Data Collection

Choosing a fieldsite – or more precisely: access – has always been one of the toughest tasks in critical research. A corporation might have a multitude of reasons for not being particularly enthusiastic about letting a researcher into their premises. One of the central problems is that the topics of a critical research project might well conflict with the corporation's managerialist interests. Alvesson and Deetz (2000) recommend a number of techniques in order to avoid having to ask for the management's permission – e.g. interviewing those leaving the organization, relying on secondary sources or becoming an employee of the company in question and collecting data informally. I still decided to

conduct the research with explicit permission from the management, not hiding in any way that I am a researcher. Firstly because otherwise it would have been rather hard to get admitted to the corporate Christmas party (unless I get a job at the company in question, which would have been impossible given my current employment), and secondly because a „secret” research would have made it nearly impossible to follow the ethical principles I deemed important (see Chapter IV.6).

In line with what was suggested in the literature, access indeed proved to be a significant limiting factor in selecting a fieldsite, thus I had to make some concessions regarding my expectations of the ideal fieldsite. Most of my **sampling criteria** were theory-driven, that is, I strived to maximize the probability of actually being able to observe the phenomenon I wanted to investigate (colonization of Christmas). First and foremost, the company had to hold a common Christmas party for its employees, and ideally the HR department or its representative should be part of the team organizing the event. This latter one was not a must, for even if it is not HR who is answerable, the job itself – its aim being the management of employee relations – still qualifies as an HRM task. Initially I focused on multinational corporations with a large number of employees, given my presumption that the dominance of impersonal coordination mechanisms and the use of Christmas as a management tool was more characteristic for this type of company. I also thought it would be interesting to have different layers of society represented in the company, that is, I would have preferred to have both white- and blue-collar workers in the organization.

In the end, the decisive factor was my personal acquaintance with one of the employees and that the company had a leader who consciously kept good relations with universities and supported various PhD research projects on a regular basis. Some firms refused due to the confidential nature of the topic, sometimes it was the potential „middleman” that believed the research to be too risky, and of course there were smaller companies that were rejected by myself. Out of my preliminary sampling criteria, it was the one about blue-collar people that could not be met in the end, because all members of the workplace community at the organization I chose had white-collar jobs. Thus it was impossible to look into how different layers of society relate to corporate Christmas.

Before conducting the actual research, I performed a **pilot study** in multiple phases. (1) During the first phase, I participated in the corporate Christmas parties (and nothing else) of two multinational corporations and recorded my observations in a research diary. These experiences contributed to the refinement of the research methodology, the „practicing”

of participant observation, the broadening of the analysis and to raising my awareness of my own presumptions and eliminating them. (2) The second phase comprised a more extensive data collection effort during the winter of 2010/11 at the Hungarian subsidiary of a multinational corporation in French/Dutch shared ownership. Their Hungarian team was not particularly large (65 people), though the corporation employs some 100 thousand people altogether, thus the impersonality characteristic for large bureaucratic organizations was there, but in a different way than in communities of several hundred or thousand people. I participated in both the meeting of the committee organizing the Christmas party (here I made an audio recording, as well) and the Christmas event itself, which took place early December that year. I also conducted some interviews before and after the Christmas party, 11 in total. The project yielded valuable and useful results, yet also made it evident that in-depth understanding necessitates a more intense presence in the organization's everyday life. An important lesson was that I, too, kept myself at a distance from the rather unpopular top manager, and did not even interview him – whereas a conversation with him would have constituted an important input to the interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation. This made me highly aware that for the sake of the study's independence, I must not identify too much with any one of the groups within the organization (Kvale 2005).

It was during the pilot period, too, that I clarified to myself: critical ethnography would be the methodology, and a case study would be the end result of my research. My interpretation of a case study follows that of Stake (1994), i.e. the case study is regarded as the examination of a bounded system rather than an independent methodology. The case itself is the subject of the research, a unique, well-defined integrated phenomenon with specific activity patterns (Stake 1994; Radácsi 2000). The subject of the present research was a specific, unique Christmas party. My objective was, however, not only to develop a deeper understanding of that unique case, but also to explore the theoretical topic outlined above, that is, to contribute to the examination of colonization as a phenomenon. Thus the purpose of completing the case study was more of an instrumental nature (Stake 1994, 237).

In order to gather inspiration before starting the actual research, I reviewed a number of periodical articles on HRM and management topics that relied on the Habermasian theory of system and lifeworld. I processed 40 periodical articles in total, 14 of which employed empirical data collection. Empirical articles started to appear during the 2000s only;

apparently, that was the time when academics became more interested in practical problems. It was also the era when qualitative research began to gain ground in the field of organizational sciences, supplying critical researchers with the methodological tools they needed. I summarized all the articles that contained empirical studies in a table, listing, in addition to the author and the title, the research purpose and question, and the data collection and analysis methods employed (Appendices 1 and 2). I found that the reports on data collection techniques – as opposed to those on data analysis – tend to be relatively detailed. Combining participant observation with interviews appeared to be common practice in critical ethnography, which I felt confirmed my own decision to do so.

It was in the winter of 2012/13 that, equipped with this knowledge, I set out to undertake the actual research at the Hungarian subsidiary of a Hungarian-owned group of companies (which also has several foreign sister companies). Data was collected by two main methods: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Document analysis and photography were used as supplementary data collection methods. Below follows a detailed account of the data collection process.

IV.3.1. Participant Observation

Before entering the fieldsite, I had to decide on the role to be taken as a participant observer. In their methodological handbook for management researchers, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1991) distinguish between four roles that researchers may take: researcher as employee, research as the explicit role, interrupted involvement and observation alone. Having given due consideration to the aspects they mention – research purpose, time frame, costs, researcher’s feeling of comfort and access –, and in order to avoid ethical issues, I opted for **research as the explicit role**. I did so even though I knew it may be difficult (and it was, indeed) to get the management’s approval for a critical research project. The authors point out that certain actors or groups within the organization might want to take advantage of the project to pursue their own agenda (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe 1991). This was not a real threat in my case, though some of the research subjects made attempts to use the study to satisfy their own unconscious psychological needs. In one of the pilot studies, for example, a self-appointed “leader” wanted to show me “the” organizational reality, what was important, what I needed to see. The trust they exhibited when sharing the organization’s “secrets” with me was valuable, but I had to pay attention not to let their perspective dominate my

interpretation of things. Thus when I encountered a similar situation later on, I recognized it and already knew how to deal with it.

The other role I relied on was the so-called **interrupted involvement** method (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe 1991), a model of participant observation frequently applied whenever observation is combined with interviews. It means that the researcher is present in the organization's life in a given period, but only sporadically: they enter the company whenever they interview people there, but leave it when they need to attend to other duties. In these cases, the researcher does not get actively involved in the work that the organization performs. Given that I did have other work assignments to take care of apart from the research project, this was the most feasible form of observation for me.

In line with the recommendation of Alvesson and Deetz (2000) I spent relatively little time at the company, limiting **data collection** to the Christmas season, namely the period between early December 2012 and mid-February 2013. Having learnt from the pilot studies, I strived for a more intense presence: on average, I spent 2-2.5 working days per week at the company's office. Most of the time, I was at my „own” desk that I was assigned in one of the departments, but every now and then I spent a day in the office of some other department to get the most colorful picture possible, especially during the Christmas season. Thus I saw the Christmas preparations, observed the decoration and experienced the atmosphere of the year-end rush. Having observed employees' work style and having taken part in their formal and informal conversations during working hours greatly contributed to understanding the organizational context. Many a time I had lunch with them, which provided good opportunities both for building trust and gathering information. With the only exception of a mother on maternity leave, all the interviews were conducted at the premises of the company. I also attended the corporate Christmas party at the end of December. The company usually holds a whole-day new year kick-off event, as well, with each one of their employees in Hungary on the list of invitees. I was present on that occasion, too.

My internal contact was an old university acquaintance of mine, who helped me get the management's approval and also all the way through the project. This was indispensable to ensure proper access, yet also carried certain risks. The advantages included the great deal of help I got in organizing things and in acquiring the company documents I needed, and also that the trust between us allowed me easy access to the information I required. Our acquaintance was, nonetheless, public and therefore in the eyes of the members of

the organization I was attached to this person. Thus, whether I wanted or not, I was considered part of their social/power network, which might have influenced what and how the interviewees told me. I dealt with this potential source of bias by striving to make my own acquaintances as soon as possible, and rely on my friend's network in the very beginning only. I tried to avoid mentioning that we have known each other for long, though I made no secret of it.

I recorded my observations in a **diary**. While in the office, it could go unnoticed that I was taking notes while observing, but the experiences of the Christmas party I recorded afterwards only, in order not to disturb the party. I strived to be present at each formal event on the agenda. I made the conscious decision to participate only in spontaneous conversations during that night, and not to push talking about the research topic so as to avoid influencing the spontaneous flow of events too much. The qualitative interviews gave me the opportunity to seek answers to the questions that came to my mind that evening.

IV.3.2. Qualitative Interviews

In addition to participant observation, I also conducted qualitative interviews, and the analysis is built upon these two techniques to more or less the same degree. „The topic of qualitative research interviews is the interviewee's lived lifeworld and their relation to it" (Kvale 2005, 41). Its purpose is to describe the central topics of the research through the interviewees' experiences and to understand their meaning in the lifeworld (Kvale 2005). And that is exactly what I aimed at by doing the interviews: to understand what corporate Christmas means to the participants and to capture the lifeworld-constitutive effect of the event.

I opted for **semi-structured interviews**, as from (among other factors) the critical nature of the research followed that there were certain preliminary interview topics that I wanted to ask my interviewees about under all circumstances, yet I had to also remain open to the topics that they introduced to the conversation. I was continuously refining the interview guide, however the pre-determined key topics remained part of the conversations throughout the entire project. These key topics were: organizational context and culture, previous Christmas parties, the Christmas season itself at the company, the current Christmas party and its relation to Christmas (December 24). Both thematic and dynamic questions (Kvale 2005) were used in the interviews, that is, in addition to the above topics, I also tried to follow up on any stories the interviewees told using detail-

oriented and interpretive questions that were phrased spontaneously, on the spot. Following Thomas's (1993) recommendation, I strived to unfold those answers, as well, that went against my preliminary expectations. A few interviews were done before the Christmas party, the rest took place afterwards. In the interviews conducted before the party, I put more emphasis on the questions about the organizational context, on memories from previous years' Christmas parties and expectations about the oncoming event; while in those made after the party, it was the interpretation of that year's Christmas that had a more significant role.

According to Kvale (2005) there is no exact answer as to how many interviews are required for any given study; the main point is that the researcher should reach what is called theoretical saturation, that is, have enough data to be able to interpret the phenomenon in question. An average of 15, give or take 10, interviews is the usual amount (Kvale 2005). Accordingly, I conducted 19 interviews in total, each one between 50 minutes and 2 hours in length, 1 hour and 10 minutes on average. I made audio recordings of the interviews, which were then transcribed word for word. I also made notes during the conversations about interviewees' body language, facial expressions and any interpretations that came to my mind.

Interviewees were chosen partly by pre-determined criteria, and partly based on recommendations and willingness to participate. I endeavored to reach the key actors and opinion leaders of the organization: the leaders, organizers of the Christmas party, the company's Santa and the opinion shapers that the others pointed out to me. Among the criteria was, too, that the sample should be sufficiently diverse with respect to age, gender, organizational position, hierarchy and years spent at the organization (the community was homogeneous with respect to nationality). Religion would have been relevant, as well, but that is a more intimate topic, which I rather tried to cover in the interviews if and when possible, but it could not become one of the sampling criteria.

IV.3.3. Additional Data Collection Techniques

Document analysis and photography were employed to complement the above methods. Document analysis meant the examination of the company's website, official documents and the letters and invitations related to the organization of the Christmas party. Part of it was the analysis of the so-called Santa Book, which contained parents' messages to the company's Santa.

Moreover, I took **photographs** of the company office's Christmas decoration and of their interior in general. I was not allowed to take pictures of people, therefore I made no photos at the Christmas party. But it was possible to look at the official pictures and short movie, and what is more, previous years' pictures and movies were also made available to me. I took notes about my impressions. The photos and the videos contributed to the analysis of the world of things and behavior patterns.

IV.4. Data Analysis Methods

My review of the articles relying on the Habermasian theory (see Appendices 1 and 2) yielded very little information about data analysis, authors mentioned it in passing only, if at all. Three of them (Forester 2003; McLean and Wainwright 2009; Samra-Fredericks 2005) chose the method of discourse analysis, and documented it in detail. In practice this meant the selection of one shorter piece of text for detailed analysis, aiming to satisfy the relevant validity criteria. This route, however, did not appear viable to me, not least because of the amount of data to be processed (298 pages of transcribed interviews). I found one single study only (Barros 2010) that employed a similar data collection method and also shared information about the analysis. Barros looked into the practice of emancipatory management at two community organizations. The author completed the study in three stages: participant observation came first, then they conducted 10 semi-structured interviews, and finally they discussed the preliminary results in a 3-hour meeting involving the members of the organization. Drawing from Miles and Huberman (1994), the data acquired through participant observation was first processed using simple visual data display, then conceptually ordered display. The end result was, beyond a piece of descriptive analysis, one table for each organization, where they matched the pre-defined attributes of emancipation with the relevant organizational characteristics and practices.

By way of reduction, the analysis of data begins as early as during or even before its collection (Miles and Huberman 1994), when the researcher makes their decisions related to the research questions and data collection, and then converts their observations into a field diary. For the sake of manageability, the amount of text so obtained needs further simplification and organization (Miles and Huberman 1994). From the multitude of techniques available for that purpose, I opted for **coding**, which was then performed using

an application for qualitative data analysis (Nvivo 8)¹⁹. I determined the codes partly based on what I experienced during the interviews, and partly on the topics that stood out from the text. For the most part, I used descriptive and interpretive codes (Miles and Huberman 1994), and avoided abstract theoretical codes (colonization, for example, would have been an obvious choice). The reason was that I felt that such codes would represent too large a step from the text towards abstraction, which in my view would have entailed the risk of arbitrariness and misinterpretation. Then again, the formation of the codes was of course also influenced by my theoretical knowledge: the gender code is clearly theory-driven, and the code 'mixing private and professional lives', for example, was also based on pre-existing knowledge.

While processing the texts, I was constantly adjusting the code structure, which I regarded as a means rather than a purpose, and thus did not aspire to create a perfect code structure. It did, nonetheless, constitute an important input to structuring the chapter on my results, identifying the key topics and, for example, exploring the script elements and layers of meaning of the Christmas party. I made notes and memos in the course of the coding process, as well.

Subsequently, I re-read the texts assigned to each of the codes and tried to capture the various interpretations, layers of meaning, official and concealed messages they carried. The method that this process resembles most is **meaning interpretation** as described by Kvale (2005), which entails the exploration of the deeper, non-evident meanings of the text and its being put in a new context, guided by the research question and the relevant theoretical background (Gelei 2002). Yet the method described by Kvale required further levels of reflection to be involved due to the critical nature of the study.

Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) refer to critical research as a **triple hermeneutic**. In a simple hermeneutic, the analysis is focused on the interviews and observations, and it is through the analysis of these that we interpret the surrounding intersubjective reality. Double hermeneutic is used by interpretive research, which concentrates on the researcher's own interpretive process and its inherent meaning-constitutive effect. The set of interpretive patterns through which the creatures doing the interpretation (e.g. the interviewees) attribute meaning to the reality are also subject to reflection. The triple hermeneutic adds one more dimension to the exploration of hidden content by revealing unconscious processes, ideological content and other manifestations of domination.

¹⁹ About the advantages of relying on computer programs see (Bokor and Radácsi 2006).

On this third level of text interpretation, I followed the so-called **principle of defamiliarization** (Thomas 1993), which is basically the same as de-naturalization, described in Chapter I.1.1. When performing the analysis, the critical researcher re-evaluates what they have seen, distances themselves from the obvious angles and creates new interpretations. Instead of the literal, or realistic, reading of the texts (Gelei 2002; Lather 1995, in: Kvale 2005), they decode the symbols and metaphors that generate the asymmetric power structure. Their goal is to reveal the limitative ideologies, beliefs, behavior norms and cultural values that keep certain groups of society in an exposed or unfavorable position (Thomas 1993), which Lather (1995, in: Kvale 2005) calls the **critical reading**. As a result of the dialectical approach, the research process becomes dichotomous: even though the researcher aspires to gain insight into and thus understand participants' world of subjective experiences, they still look at this world with a critical attitude and strive to uncover hidden ideological constructs (Wainwright 1997).

Thus meaning interpretation was characterized by a conscious, transparent (as much as possible), continuously reflected, **viewpoint-dependent** form of **perspectival subjectivity**, which must be distinguished from so-called biased, unreflected subjectivity (Kvale 2005; Gelei 2002). The reflexive methodology demands self-reflection from the researcher, as well, to be applied to their own presumptions, schemes of thought and habitual interpretive patterns. The critical researcher (too) relies on an established vocabulary, they are more sensitive to certain topics, all of which affects the conclusions they draw. It was these interpretive patterns and trains of thought that Chapters I and II of the thesis discussed. To me, perspectival subjectivity means that my research results were interpreted in this theoretical framework, relying on this conceptual domain, and that I was aware of and open about it. This must not, however, turn into arbitrariness. The reliability and validity of my research results will be discussed in the next chapter.

IV.5. Validity, Reliability and Generalizability of the Research

As regards qualitative research, the interpretation of validity, reliability and generalizability necessarily differs from what those concepts stand for with respect to quantitative methodologies (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe 1991; Kvale 2005; Miles and Huberman 1994), and the topic is inevitably attached to ensuring the legitimation of qualitative research. Therefore the literature of qualitative methodology has invested great efforts into clarifying the concepts and providing researchers with tools to ensure the rigorosity of their research. Given that the topic has been discussed at length in both

the Hungarian and English literature (see, among others, (Bokor 2000; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe 1991; Gelei 2002; Kvale 2005; Maxwell 2013; Miles and Huberman 1994; Radácsi 2000), the three definitions I provide here are not intended to account for all aspects of the topic. By qualitative validity we mean that the researcher managed to gain full insight into the world of meaning of the locals (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe 1991). Reliability pertains to the consistency of what the research has revealed (Kvale 2005); its control question being whether other researchers on other occasions would arrive at similar observations (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe 1991). Generalizability refers to the probability that thoughts and theories originating from one situation can be applied to other situations, as well (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe 1991).

The books and studies on critical research methodology (Alvesson 2011; Alvesson and Deetz 2000; Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000; Madison 2005; Thomas 1993; Wainwright 1997) refrain from discussing validity and reliability at length, and focus on **reflexivity** instead. Generalizability, on the other hand, rarely comes up as an explicit topic, thus I will just briefly touch upon it, as well. While part of the criteria and tools (for instance the transparency of the research process) characteristic for interpretive qualitative studies (Burrell and Morgan 1979) can be applied to critical research, as well, it is not „results appear[ing] (...) self-explanatory, and conclusions irresistibly true, beautiful, good and persuasive” (Kvale alapján Gelei 2002, 189–190) that renders a critical study valid, for it is exactly the non-self-explanatory, non-obvious readings that we are looking for.

It is a common trait of the critical and qualitative traditions that they strive to link the different levels of action with the broader social, economic and historical context, and to prevent culturally shared meanings from distorting the researcher’s interpretation (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000). In Thomas’s view, ethnographical researchers are much rather active and powerful creators than passive recorders of data, for they create new realities through the scientific language they use. It is essential that one asks the question what the „truth-factor” of the study is, how the research might have been affected by our own values and ideological commitment (Thomas 1993). Even though the literature review may guide our attention, we have to remain open to changing our own beliefs and preconceptions, which requires openness and flexibility (Thomas 1993). Therefore the most important task before starting a qualitative study is to uncover and make ourselves

aware of any **preconceptions** and to continuously self-reflect throughout the research project.

As regards the present research, this was warranted by my keeping a **research diary** from the very moment I started working on the theoretical part. Incorporating Wainwright's (1997) suggestions, as well, the topics of the diary before the empirical part had started were: my own relation to authority, the limitations of the theoretical framework, and what Christmas and corporate Christmas meant to me. During the data collection and data analysis phases, focus shifted to field-related issues: my relationship to the research subjects, possible interview scenarios, the values and interpretations that my interview questions reflect, the impact that any potential bias of mine could have on the interviewees. These topics naturally brought along the reflection on my workplace relationships, my relationship with my parents and to religion. Accordingly, the diary as a whole was not meant to be shared due to its personal nature, but I will bring some specific examples.

As early as in the course of the pilot studies, I had to reconsider my idea that people perceive corporate Christmas as an interference with their private lives, i.e. as an obligation. Some of them indeed do, but many are happy to attend, and it is not only the management that use it to promote their own agenda, but it does fulfil certain functions for the employees, as well. I was quite surprised to see how many things Christmas is about and how strongly it reflects the current topics of the corporate culture at hand. Which experience, at the same time, also raised doubts in me if I will be able to tell anything about corporate Christmas beyond understanding the organizational culture in question (theoretical generalization). Having compared the cases of the pilot studies with the actual research project, I realized that even though any particular case reflects the specifics of the given organization's culture, the common point is, on the one hand, that they all use the Christmas party as a tool and, on the other hand, that the event also gives room for coping with current organizational problems collectively. Also, I received confirmation for my assumption that „corporate Christmas” is a concept that has lost its meaning for the most part – as the interviewees put it: „this isn't Christmas, that's just what we call it”.

Reflexivity is furthered by testing the knowledge that has been created through conversations, which is what Kvale (2005) calls **communicative validity**. This can be best verified in action research projects, yet ethnographical studies also provide

opportunities for submitting the interpretations created in various phases of the research to intersubjective control. With regard to the present study, it was done in the following way. In line with qualitative traditions, my report relies on quotations to support my conclusions, which gives readers, too, an opportunity to create their own interpretations. For the ease of reading, I edited the quotations, but only the filler words typically appearing in speech (so, well, like, that is, etc.) were removed. It is basic, institutionalized practice in PhD schools to have the respective supervisors opine on the research report while it is being prepared. One of them read the main part of the interview transcripts as well, which did not only enhance the validity of the discussion of potential interpretations, but I also received feedback about the possible bias my interview questions might induce. Furthermore, I shared the results with two acquaintances of mine who were employed by the company at the time, and they added their side notes to the manuscript.

Feedback from both the (now past) employees of the company (both of them women) and my supervisors (both of them men) mainly concerned my conclusions related to the subject of gender. As a result I realized that as a female researcher, I am personally affected by this topic myself. Having gone through the results again and again, a number of memories emerged when I myself had been victim to negative discrimination. I was a bit afraid of the topic already during the research process. I even considered omitting the topic completely, for Thomas (1993), too, recommends that if one is too much affected by a topic emotionally, they should rather work with other aspects of the case in order to avoid potential bias. But then I also recalled the words of Kvale (2005), who, with respect to communicative validity, also underlines the vulnerability of researchers' self-confidence. Finally I decided that omitting this aspect would mean not telling the whole truth, as after all, even the two female employees agreed that women had a lower status in the company (though the explanations they proposed were different from mine). I made efforts to refine my interpretations, and to show that the status quo was upheld by men and women collectively, and that it was not necessarily perceived as a form of oppression by the latter— or at least not all of them.

The **pilot studies**, as well, enhanced validity and reliability, as they allowed me to design a more justified methodological framework, and through the elimination of my preconceptions, they also supported self-reflection. Even though I did not make a detailed comparative analysis of the cases, the experiences and observations from the pilot studies shaped my interpretations as a researcher, and contributed to laying the groundwork for

theoretical generalization (Kvale 2005). The pilot studies, and the multiple data collection methods and data sources employed may also be considered as a means of triangulation (Maxwell 2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2014).

The value of any critical research project is determined by its **contribution to the emancipation project**, and by how successful it is in amplifying the voice of marginalized groups (Duberley and Johnson 2009). As Thomas (1993) put it, at the end of any research, there comes the question: “so what?”, that is, what the social consequences of the study are. It is exactly this area where certain authors find the impact of critical ethnography to be too small in comparison to action research: it does little to change the position of the groups under investigation (Jordan és Yeomans 1995, in: Duberley and Johnson 2009). Others argue that through the dissemination of research findings – education, for instance –, it does actually have an indirect influence on the lives of oppressed groups (Jermier 1996, in: Duberley and Johnson 2009).

Concerning the present research, it has been clear to me all along that the methodology leaves little room for direct change, which I did not set as an objective, either. I do hope, nevertheless, that the interviews themselves and the topics that came up during the interviews contributed to the participants of the study taking a more reflective perspective on their relationship to corporate Christmas and hence to the company itself. The position of women in the company and in society was, for example, a critical topic during the interviews, which both I and – hopefully – my interviewees got to know more about thanks to this research project. I also hope that I will have the chance to disseminate my research findings in the widest possible circle, and thus to call attention to the risks that some of the widely accepted and apparently obvious management tools carry.

Finally, some words about the **generalizability** of the case study. The present study allows for naturalistic and theoretical generalization. Spontaneous, naturalistic generalization means that the case study may provide the reader with knowledge similar to real experience (Stake 1994, in: Radácsi 2000), which they then contrast to their own experience, and thus may create knowledge that is valid in other contexts, as well (Stake 1994, in: Gelei 2002). Theoretical generalization entails contrasting the results of the case study with a theoretical framework and using them to improve the framework (Gelei 2002). In the process, the researcher elaborates on their evidence and makes their arguments explicit (Kvale 2005). As regards this present research, I put more emphasis on the latter one, and wish to contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the

theoretical problems raised, while the detail of the case study ensures that the opportunity for naturalistic generalization still remains open for each reader.

IV.6. Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research project, I strived to respect the ethics recommendations proposed by Kvale (2005), with the special „criticalness” considerations also in mind.

By taking research as the explicit role, I could go for **informed consent** (Kvale 2005), that is, to acquaint respondents with the research purpose, what the data will be used for and the potential risks of participation (Kvale 2005). However I had to find the right balance between the amount and depth of the information shared, and how much I influence participants’ responses. Given that the critical researcher is looking for the various forms of oppression to begin with, they are often accused of delivering biased results. Which in this present case would mean „discovering” the colonization of the lifeworld and pressure from the management even when it is the spontaneous and unbiased renewal or reformation of Christmas traditions that is taking place. Therefore when introducing the research purpose, stress was on understanding the meaning of corporate Christmas, the considerations related to social criticism were only mentioned indirectly, through a couple of more provocative interview questions. The goal basically was to have interviewees bring up the topic of power spontaneously.

Omitting the critical purposes from the conversation constituted a particularly difficult ethical dilemma with regard to the owner, who authorized the research project, and the HR manager – as it was exactly them whose counter-interest the literature on critical methodology has been emphasizing. I decided however that the research into corporate Christmas does not pose too high a risk to the company’s reputation, and that it is not likely that it would affect the workplace status quo radically. I figured that informing them in too much detail, trying to translate lengthy philosophy of science arguments into everyday language would have been of more harm than use (validity).

The **confidential treatment of data** (Kvale 2005) is a fundamental matter to both quantitative and qualitative research. Therefore the real names of both the company and the respondents were replaced with made-up names throughout the dissertation. I made sure, furthermore, that the text would not contain expressions or references, either, that would allow for the company or the respondents to be identified. Thus the requirement of confidentiality has been met with respect to the general public. It is unclear, however, how the anonymity of the respondents could be warranted within the company in

question. For, given the employees' insider knowledge, as little a detail as the phrases used by a specific respondent might betray their identity. Accordingly, I refrain from introducing the subjects in detail, and the analysis states the respondent's position or area of expertise only where it is of significance to what they said.

To make things even more complex, there is a conflict between the **need for intersubjective validation** and the ethical requirement of confidentiality (Kvale 2005). The former would necessitate that I inform the respondents, including the management and HR, of my results. In the end, I decided to share the results with two close acquaintances of mine who had previously worked for the company (their division was sold in the meantime). Their input contributed to ensuring the validity of the study without breaching confidentiality.

The third ethical aspect proposed by Kvale (2005) is the weighing of the **potential consequences of the research project**, that is, the possible damages and the anticipated benefits. In my opinion, the key source of risk for the interviewees in this specific study was confidentiality. The attention alone that the interviewee gets from the researcher may be a valuable experience for the respondents (Kvale 2005). Given the critical nature of my research, however, the most important one of all the potential gains was the chance to induce a process of self-reflection either on the individual or the community level – unfortunately I have no information if I have succeeded in that.

Part V: Results of the Case Study: Family-Friendly Christmas at Engineer Co.

V.1. About the Company

The Engineer Group was founded in 2001 as a small enterprise, and the majority owner has been Peter ever since, who takes an active part in governing the group. With time the company has evolved from a small business of 10 employees into a large corporation with about 1,000 people on their payroll, having several locations in Hungary and operating in four other countries, as well. They often work on projects in other foreign countries, as well. Officially, they are still considered a medium enterprise, as the corporation was divided into several smaller entities, coordinated under a single **holding company**. Beyond practical reasons, this might also have been driven by the owner's aversion towards large corporations. The research project was performed at the headquarters of the group in Budapest, where the vast majority of their Hungarian employees – about 300 to 400 people – worked. The main business of the company is the delivery of engineering and information technology services, yet part of the group is a wine company, as well.

V.1.1. The Founding of the Company and Its Transformation into a Group

Engineer Co. was founded by the employees of Predecessor Co., which they left in 2001 because of a project that Predecessor Co. thought was too risky to undertake. The project turned out fine in the end, which along with the then upwards trend in outsourcing led to Engineer Co. having more and more assignments from Predecessor Co., and they were also borrowing workforce from Engineer Co. In the beginning, the managements of the two companies had close ties. One may observe a number of similarities between the two companies' values, traditions and celebrations, what is more, even their (original) names are similar and some of their subsidiaries are also located close to each other.

A few years later Peter, the current owner, bought out the founders and has been the majority owner of Engineer Group ever since. Opinions on Peter's role diverge, but all of the interviews suggested that he is a strong, charismatic leader. Formally he was not the superior of every interviewee, but still, whenever management decisions were on the table, it was his name that came up, the names of the direct superiors or the other managing directors were hardly ever mentioned.

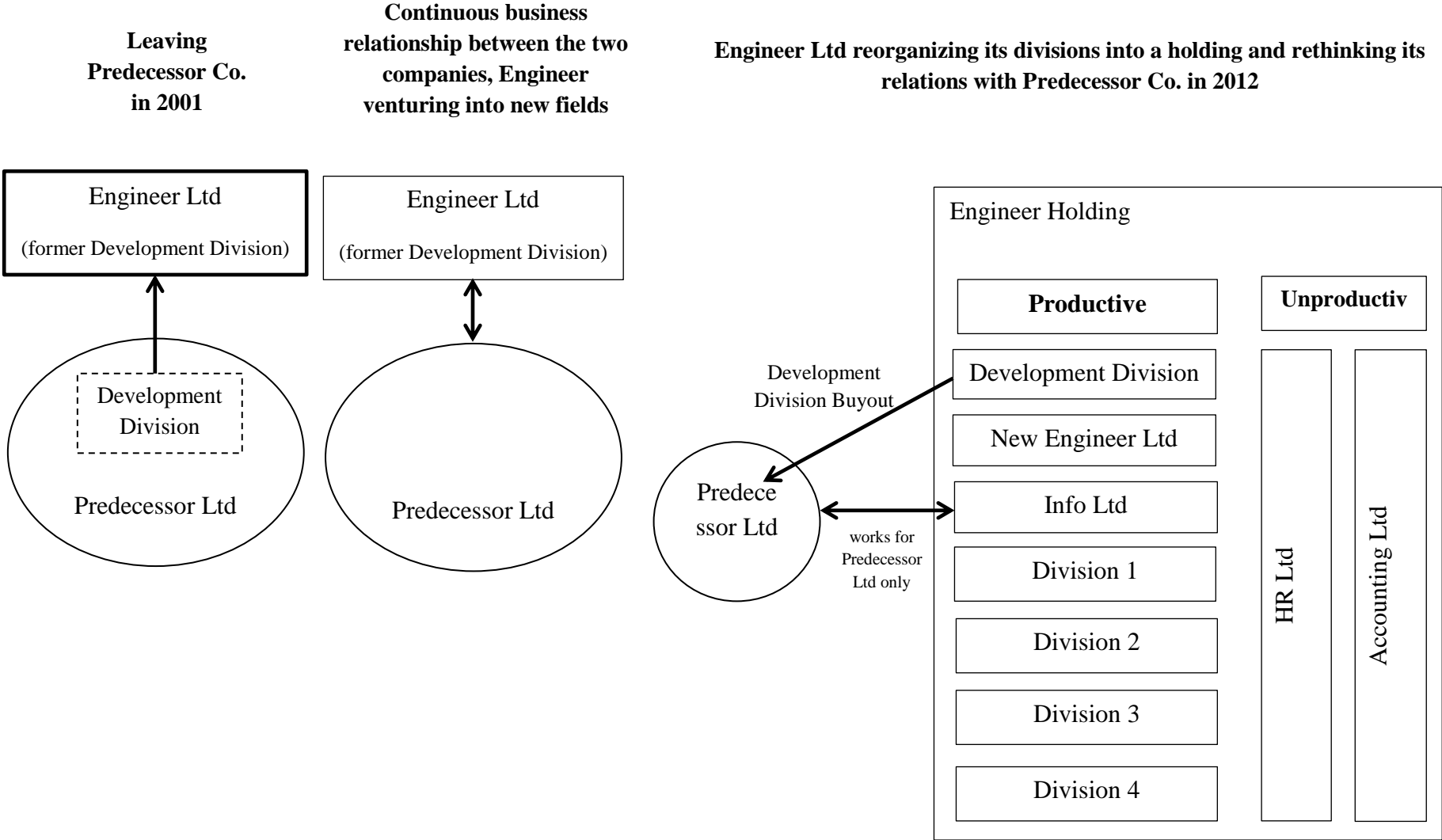
The source of the company's growth was the Development division, which had an ongoing assignment from Predecessor Co. (which is the member of a large multinational

corporation based in Germany). Relying on this lucrative and stable branch of their business, the company has been continuously expanding and venturing into newer and newer fields. By 2005, the original headcount of ten turned into one hundred. Their rapid expansion suffered a minor setback during the 2008 crisis, yet quickly recovered its momentum and at the time of my research, the turn of 2012, the company already employed as many as 1000 people. At this very same time, Predecessor Co. was in the process of insourcing the Development division, i.e. taking over its supplier.

In the reading of the employees of Engineer Co., the Development division was sold because their historically good relations with Predecessor Co. had become tense. They opined that even though Engineer Co. is still following the same values that the two companies had set together, Predecessor Co. set out in the wrong direction after the previous, „friendly” management had been replaced. They do not talk about the economic causes or effects of the deal. The uncertainties that the new situation brought about were only a topic of discussion among the employees, official communications from the management continued to emphasize the stability they enjoyed thanks to their growth.

Part of the Engineer Group is Info Ltd, comprised of a group of people who left Predecessor Co. in 2008. Almost the entire workforce of Info Ltd have been employed as temporary workers by Predecessor Co. This is still rather typical, yet with the takeover of the Development division in 2012, they set out to become less dependent on Predecessor Co., which is basically an euphemistic way to say that they have less business from Predecessor Co. Earlier, for example, the employees of Info Ltd had celebrated Christmas with Predecessor Co., while now they joined the Engineer Group. Info Ltd’s search for identity was a central topic at the official events of the Engineer Group.

Figure 8: The Engineer Group



In addition to the above two fields of activity, four other divisions – also in the engineering and IT businesses – are part of the group’s Hungarian branch. These divisions are independent from Predecessor Co., are mostly active in the Hungarian market, but have a significant amount of assignments from abroad, as well. The calculable cash flow of the Development division smoothed out the fluctuations in the income generating capacity of the divisions that typically undertook high-risk, fixed-price projects, and thus improved the corporation’s liquidity and warranted a certain security. In the new setup, however, the stable profitability of these divisions became critical, as well. The uncertainty and anxiety about the group’s profitability is perceptible in the organization, a part of which can clearly be attributed to people’s concerns for their jobs. The majority of the interviewees concluded the topic saying „Peter surely knows what he is doing”.

V.1.2. The Cultural Effects of the Formal Organizational Structure

Continuous growth and the strong presence of the owner are decisive factors in the company’s life. Growth brought about structural changes, as well. Peter divided the company into smaller firms according to functions. As a result, they now have companies that do productive work only, and some that deliver back office services (HR, accounting) to the former. Employees of the productive companies have engineering and information technology qualifications for the most part, and are, due to the horizontal segregation characteristic for the profession, almost exclusively males (Koncz 2011; Nagy 1997; Nagy and Primecz 2010). Whereas the employees of the back office companies tend to have qualifications in economics, accounting, communication and HR, and most of them are females. Secretary jobs are filled by women in all the companies. An unintended effect of the reorganization was the strengthening of gender segregation and related stereotypes: women work in unproductive areas, while men in productive ones, that is, women spend, while men generate money. The management claims that, in order to counterbalance this effect, they strive to employ as many women as possible in engineering roles, which objective they support through spectacular civic events (e.g. Girls Day), as well. In spite of these efforts, I will argue that the company culture is heavily penetrated by patriarchal norms and the dominance of traditional male vs. female roles.

The impact that growth has on their company culture – „multinationalization”, as some of the interviewees referred to it – will be discussed at a later point. At the time of my research, the company was in an intermediate state, the owner’s „manual control” is still

very strong, but some effects of their standardization efforts are already apparent. The feeling of uncertainty created by the reorganization was further increased by the takeover of the Development division.

V.1.3. Organizational Culture

I will only provide a brief overview of the major aspects of the organization's culture here, its details will be presented on the example of corporate Christmas, through which I myself experienced the most important topics, as well. Thomas (1993) says that the phenomenon or event chosen as the subject of the research opens a window onto a wider view. I had a similar experience while researching corporate Christmas: Christmas is a window through which the cultural specifics, contradictions and conflicts of the organizational lifeworld become visible.

The Engineer Group has a **strong organizational culture**, which is strongly influenced by the owner's values and the traditions and habits inherited from Predecessor Co. With the growth of the corporation, the influence of the original cultural norms and values receded, and the company's values got much more diverse. The „old” employees still follow the original values, yet those who joined the company one or two years ago only do not share these meanings that much.

V.1.3.1. Family-friendliness

The majority of my respondents pointed out during the conversation that the company won the Family-Friendly Workplace award. During the two years in question, the company won almost every award one could imagine. Many refer to these as a sort of evidence, yet there were some doubtful voices, too.

This is why I am, by the way, proud of all our awards, that the company has, and I always tell this whenever we get there, or at a presentation about the company or a conference. These are all awards that we did not win by setting it as a goal to win them, and then preparing for it very consciously. But there was a call for applications, which someone saw and thought I think we could do this, and then we did it, because it's in our organizational culture. (...) by now the company has become much more aware that this is a marketing tool that we have not used at all so far, but, that this has been a part of our organizational culture for long. (Sandra)

Peter figured let's become a Family-Friendly Workplace, or at least apply for it, but just like two weeks before the deadline. (...) That he read how good it was. He would like this to be in harmony, he does have the intention, but rather under the aspect how good an advertisement this is with respect to attracting people to the company. You can put the logo up everywhere, you know. (...) The badge, and all, on the website, and we're there at the job fair, we put it on, sure. So it does have a value in this respect, we wrote a nice application, obviously we wrote about the parts that indeed work like that, we told no lies, of course, many things work like that. (...) for the company is flexible in quite a lot of things, we could say that's where we started, we have these ideas, we've passed these stages of development, look how good the direction we are headed is. That's how we won actually, that we could phrase it nicely, and prove it that the direction is good. (Mirtill)

Family as a value permeates the organization's life on multiple levels. Almost everyone associated the joint celebration of corporate Christmas with this value, which also coincides with the official message promoted by the management. The company holds four celebrations each year: the Family Day on Pentecost, St Nicholas Day, Christmas and the Engineer Day in early January. Employees' family members are invited for all of these except the last one; children rarely attend the corporate Christmas party, but it would not be without precedent. Furthermore, underlining the importance of the family is a central element in the management's communication, what is more, there were plans to reform the remuneration scheme accordingly. In the owner's words, the ideal employee has a wife, house, car and two or three children, would like sustain their family – and hence he is a reliable, loyal resource for the company, who delivers uniform performance.

V.1.3.2. Security That Comes at a Price

In exchange for employees' loyalty, the company offers job security. The majority of interviewees underlined that terminations are not characteristic for the company, they could not really mention any specific examples. Fluctuation is rather caused by those leaving voluntarily, but is relatively low. During the crisis, the company secured their workers' jobs in a rather peculiar way, which one of the interviewees described as follows:

When the 2008 crisis hit, the management did something I thought was a very good move: they summoned the entire company, attendance was not compulsory, and they basically told us in no uncertain terms that hard times were ahead of us. What would we like, rather to have a certain percentage of the employees fired or are we willing to give up a part of our salaries if it comes to that. I think 100% of us, or nearly that many, went for the latter option, and that basically was an indication of the management's approach, that at least they offered an alternative, and the employees' attitude, too, that they could cooperate in this matter. Well, people's vested personal interests obviously had a role in this, too. (Jenő)

This involvement-based management of the crisis indicates that mutual loyalty is indeed important to the leaders: they do not expect it from their employees only, but the company abides by this value, as well. When the owner saw that he might not be able to keep the employees of a given division in the long run, he rather opted for prevention, i.e. for the sale of the division, which took place in multiple phases after my project. In the employees' perception, the avoidance of layoffs has two negative consequences. First, that they have kept delaying the replacement of underperformers with „better quality” employees for years now and second, that the company pays somewhat below the market average. In exchange for that they offer security and stability, and the chance for a job abroad, which then comes with a matching salary, too.

There is one person I could specifically name of whom I know they were fired, but this year for example there was a layoff, and a couple of colleagues got the sack, but you don't even really hear about it. That someone was laid off, no, that's not something I would get to know. (...) It is more typical that someone leaves of their own will, because they feel it's better somewhere else, or the conditions more favorable. But they don't kick anyone out just like that, which by the way bothers me a bit, because, you know, this way those who work have to bear an extra burden, as opposed to those who deliver less. So maybe they should draw line, that we don't need to keep everyone here, if they aren't useful as an employee, but well, this is the company policy, it's not me in charge of these things. (...) So if you can offer a calculable, reliable workplace, obviously you might ask for something extra in return from your employee, obviously that they work for less money. (Robi)

V.1.3.3. Conservative Values

The company culture is unquestionably permeated by a certain system of values and ideology, which the interviewees described with the word „conservative”, and which they attributed to the management. The senior managers themselves refrained from taking an open stance during the interviews and expressed their values far more moderately than the employees did. For the majority of the employees, this also serves as a means of cohesion, whoever does not share these views, however, reacts by distancing themselves (from corporate Christmas, for example). The employees rarely questioned these values during the interviews, but did so a couple of times while on lunch together. The main pillars of their conservative organizational culture are:

One of them is **family-centeredness**, and encouraging employees to have children, which I have already outlined above. Given that this topic is closely intertwined with that of corporate Christmas, it will be a topic of emphasis later on.

The second one is to **support what is „national”**, what is **from Hungary**. This value is expressed less explicitly, it was just small gestures that inferred its presence. The Christmas gifts sent to business partners, for example, included wine and sausages. Moreover, in one of his media appearances, the owner underlined that he makes sure that each of his employees has a chance for an assignment in a foreign country during their youth, so that they can bring home the knowledge acquired there and utilize it for the country's benefit. One of the interviewees gave the following account:

Well, I could say, that conservative, family-friendly, Hungarian-loving, Hungary-supporting kind. I'm not saying noone ever has tricked a Hungarian regulation for the benefit of the company, but that something like this is said: „Guys, gas might be more expensive, but fill up your cars in Hungary, I'll pay for it”. Obviously he pays for the business trips, but, that he rather pays for the more expensive Hungarian fuel from the company budget. (Ödön)

The third element is religion and the **Christian values** associated with it. Interviewees believe the senior managers to be religious, the owner even made a statement on this personally, and the behavior of his fellow managers reinforce the related traditions and values. This was mainly pointed out by those who were religious themselves, and for

whom talking about Christmas naturally evoked the topic of religion, as well. Three of the company's celebrations mentioned above are also related to Christian traditions (Pentecost, Christmas, St Nicholas Day) – even though allegedly the reason for scheduling Family Day for Pentecost originally was that former legislation granted tax exemption for a maximum of two events as long as they were related to some Christian holiday.

Lastly, there is a sort of anti-capitalist and **anti-conglomerate sentiment**, though it is the least representative element of the company culture. It was one of the senior managers who shared details about their skepticism towards the so-called „world of money”. Also, this was the idea behind the restructuring effort meant to keep their medium enterprise status, and was a good match to the desire to avoid the taxes levied on large corporations. It was reflected in statements like: „we're not a typical multinational”, „it isn't all about the work here” and „family, too, is an important value for our leaders, not just the profits”.

My partner, she's become my girlfriend since, she pointed out, this must be a good company after all, if you have a management like this. So this was the first time she saw this. What is more, she had been somewhat prejudiced, too, that in a competitive economy, at a prosperous company, everything would revolve around competitiveness, and that even the Christmas party would be about what we have achieved so far, what needs to be achieved in the future, and so on. So for her it was a pleasant surprise what the managers' speeches were like, what topics they discussed. (Attila)

V.1.3.4. Becoming Multinational

In connection with growth, interviewees reported the weakening of the above cultural values, usually in a negative context. Coworkers do not know each other that much anymore, relationships are becoming less and less personal, trust is becoming scarce, the distance to the managers is increasing, decisions are becoming less transparent, and they are faced with more and more formal rules and administrative duties. Simultaneously, their faith in job security is wavering, partly due to the current concerns about their profitability, and partly because of the weakened personal relationships with the managers.

When I was hired, well I have no idea what the headcount was then, but I think we were tenth the size. Back then everyone knew everyone else more or less, now noone seems to know anyone. We have grown to become a real big corporation. Now I have to ask my colleague which company they are in and to whom they will issue the invoice, this is not the same place as the one I joined back then. It is not that good, this atomization, and centralization, too, at the same time. Now, the IT guy with whom we used to discuss whatever had to be taken care of, I'll have to ask them to make an offer when and for how much they'll do it. I think it'll be difficult, what is more, I don't really trust it, because it used to be completely different until we were in the same boat and they helped because of that, and it'll be completely different when they'll help because they'll be bound by a contract. So I think the atmosphere is completely different now. (Pali)
I'm not saying it was a backyard startup, but in fact there were around 10-30 people in the first two years, it was afterwards that it started to grow, and it used to have a very important role. There were many more

get-togethers than just the Christmas party, plenty of „let’s-have-a-beer” occasions, and it was these events where practically all information exchange took place. This used to have a very important organizational role. (Szandra)

The necessary changes in terms of management, process organization and standardization followed the company’s growth with a significant delay only. This acted to further increase tension in the organization, as the coordination mechanisms they used to rely on had already become dysfunctional, but they had not yet been replaced by the new, impersonal mechanisms. The company culture inevitably became weaker, because there was less and less room for mutual agreements based on personal contact, and thus the reproduction processes of the organizational lifeworld had become flawed. Meanwhile, the implementation of the impersonal coordination mechanisms that could have eased the pressure on the lifeworld was delayed, and to top it all, Peter was micromanaging a wide range of issues (e.g. the organization of Engineer Christmas, as well). The pathologies of growth-induced impersonalization were clearly apparent with respect to the corporate Christmas party, as well, which will be discussed in detail later on.

V.1.3.5. Professional Culture: Engineer-elitism

The fact that the majority of the employees are engineers is clearly a determinant of the company culture. However this was hardly ever mentioned in the interviews – maybe because these cultural characteristics were part of interviewees’ naturally granted knowledge in the lifeworld, which they were not made aware of during the interviews. It was the female Engineer employee that read the first manuscript of the results who pointed out to me that this topic was missing from the thesis.

Male interviewees sometimes associated the suppression of emotions and strict rationality with the topic, while two of my female respondents mentioned engineer-elitism. Engineer-elitism is closely related to the gender topic: it is the women who are not engineers, and thus do inferior work and possess inferior knowledge (a typical case of horizontal segregation). A female engineer, however, is judged differently. As a consequence, they sometimes „forget” that women also work for the company, e.g. only address males at company events.

V.2. A Christmas of Engineers

Subsequently I will show what Christmas looks like at Engineer Co. On the one hand, I do so on the level of the events, and on the other hand, I will also present the meanings and interpretations that participants attribute to those events. I will highlight, as well, the

processes through which the cultural values, interpretive patterns, behavior norms and personal self-identities are reproduced. At the same time, I will work towards answering the first two research questions on the level of specific organizational phenomena:

- How are cultural meanings and norms, interpersonal relationships and personal identities reproduced in the company during Christmas time?
- How does power (organizational hierarchy and control) and money (profit imperative) affect these reproductive processes?

Christmas will be considered in its broad sense: the analysis starts with the Christmas season, yet later I also discuss St Nicholas Day. The subchapter will be centered around the analysis of the corporate Christmas party, which has two main reasons. First, the event was pushed into the foreground by the timing of the research. And my observations and the interviews also told me that it was this event that best represented Christmas in the eyes of the employees, and the management activities aimed at building the company culture, strengthening the limits of the community and fostering employees' identification with the company were also focused on this event.

V.2.1. The Christmas Period

At Engineer Co. the Christmas season – i.e. more or less the month of December – is not really about preparing and tuning up for the holidays. Interviewees most frequently mentioned their **workload** when asked to characterize this period. The intensity of people's workload at the organization is not equable, it always depends on the nature of the assignment and the customer's needs. At the accounting and HR departments, for example, the end of the year is always busy, partly because of the year-end closing, and partly due to the Christmas party, organized by HR and recorded in the books by accounting. Thus the corporate Christmas party imposes certain special work duties, as well, on these departments.

Sure I hope it won't be me organizing the Christmas party! I honestly hope. That's terrible stress to cap it all, for at the end of the year there's lots of administrative duties, too many things at the same time. (Mirtill)
We're always in a big rush around that time, it's terrible. We have the audit next week, so everyone is doing their last minute spending like crazy. It's just awful. (Ilona)

At the engineering and IT divisions, people are typically either assigned to an on-site customer project until Christmas with a heavy workload, or they take their holidays because the customer's employees are on holiday, too. These offices are, thus, practically empty during December. What is more, some reported that they were required to take their holidays.

For us, Decembers are rather busy, and it's often hard to take some holidays, delay somewhat, spend a bit more time with the family, so it's always just a rush, but that doesn't depend on the company, but the company's profile, the industry that we're in. (Tamás)

You have to take it [holidays] so that it's not just one or two people hanging around in the office, because then there's no work, one may assume, there's just partying. Let them work properly in January, now they should rather take holidays. This is my gut feeling. (Ódön)

It was my female respondents mostly who mentioned that the Christmas season is more tense because they have to deliver in two areas simultaneously: in their jobs and at home, as well. Which on the one hand suggests the prevalence of the traditional division of labor in families: it is the woman who has to prepare the family home for the holiday (Vachhani and Pullen 2011); on the other hand, it might be due to the fact that the majority of female employees work for the overburdened HR and accounting departments.

I thought this'll be the time to do as I like, cook, bake, will have lots of time for buying presents, 'cause that hasn't been the case so far. You used to run around like crazy, rather. But then there were these reorganizations, people leaving, so this last week I rarely made it home earlier than eight, and it got me so exhausted and stressed that I haven't yet bought the Christmas presents, like, Jesus, what now. (Bori)

If I now try to imagine how it's gonna be to be working, well, it will be quite different, it will be much more of a rush there at the end of the year. There'll be a crazy rush both at home and in the office, how these two, how we'll be able to manage, like really, how I'll be able to make it to the choir practices, and bake the cookies, decorate, tidy up, I have no idea, no, not the faintest. (Mirtill)

Respondents' approach to the characterization of the Christmas period typically was to describe the presence/absence of the Christmas spirit, which they associated with the following activities: decorating the office, employees exchanging gifts, common eating/drinking. It was these activities they brought examples for or the lack of which they mentioned, looking for potential reasons for their absence.

Around the secretaries' offices, the picture of the „**Christmas-time office**” was rather dominated by the presence of gift boxes and postcards, giving a spatial representation of the busy period, as well. Also, there was the odd chocolate Santa or Christmas mug, calendar, or sometimes a cookie box on some of the employees' desks. Decorating the offices is not really typical at the company, even though that is what most interviewees thought was necessary for the Christmas mood. The differences between the various subcultures is also reflected in how their offices look at Christmas time. At Info Ltd they had a Christmas tree, which symbolized for the employees a closer-knit community, togetherness and the manager's attention. At the accounting and marketing departments, located on the same floor as Peter's office, an advent wreath was placed in the hall at his specific request.

Practically it's only the corporate Christmas party that this manifests itself in. In our division, for example, very few people will be working as of next week (...) so the festive spirit that could form in the office, there's noone there by then. (Robi)

It's of a dual nature really, that I'd possibly like it, to have that element to add to the atmosphere, and when I'd pass by it'd be nice to think of that, but then again (...) it's hardly a coincidence that we don't have it,

this is what so many males in one place leads to, that we don't need it that much to actually do something about it. So we don't have it. (Pali)

They explain the lack of Christmas spirit at the workplace partly with people taking holidays/being at projects, and partly with men being in majority, that is, they consider decoration and hence the creation of the right atmosphere to be part of women's role (see (Vachhani and Pullen 2011)). This is also reflected in how the Christmas party is organized, as we will see later on.

Spontaneous **gift-giving** between the employees occurs on a casual basis. They told me about two specific cases when they got presents from a manager. More of a surprise was that one team of engineers once had chocolate Santas placed on their desks by the cleaning lady. Officially, the company gives gifts to its employees at the Christmas party – we will return to this topic later.

The other direction of gift-giving is the gifts and postcards that the company sends to its business partners. It is the secretaries and the managers who take care of these, the other employees do not really encounter them. In 2012 the gift bag included Engineer wines, sweets and a towel. The management takes a calculative approach to these gifts, the significance they attribute to them is not symbolic, but strategic. Just like with the business presents that the managers of Engineer Co. receive from the partners. These are typically donated as prizes for the lottery.

Of course, basically the people who have contact to the account, they make suggestions to, say, prioritize accounts using the given budget, who's the one to get the biggest pack, who gets a smaller one, and the smallest one, who are the ones to get a greeting via email only and who are the ones not to get anything, possibly. Not any more sophisticated than that. – And then the prioritization is based on who bring more revenue or who is more long-term strategically or...? – Not necessarily, it's way more complex than that I think. Sales is not a science, but there's many things about it that you can do in a purposeful fashion. E.g you might give some bigger present to someone at a company who doesn't represent actual business potential to you, but, say, can help you achieve higher business potential, like, say, the assistant of the general manager, who makes sure you can have a chat with the GM. (Detre)

Since then, I've been joking that okay, let's cross out that supplier from the supplier list in QM that did not send me a postcard for Christmas, or did not bring a gift. Because then it's someone else at the company that they are trying to bribe, not me. (laughs)(Peter)

Business gifts, even though they are not personal, still convey a message: they are the means of showing your respect, and the acknowledgement they express represents an obligation at the same time: for the sake of reciprocity, the present (and the benevolence) ought to be requited (Lemmergaard and Muhr 2011). Peter's witty remark tellingly reflects the ambivalent characteristic of business gifts that even though giving them is legal, they are still always meant to influence the receiving party in some way (Lemmergaard and Muhr 2011). For that reason, the company has set a maximum value for the gifts that its employees may accept.

Around Christmas, **eating and drinking** together is more typical, employees tend to bring cookies or gingerbread more frequently during this period. At the accounting department, I also participated in a little Christmas winetasting event, where employees sampled the wines produced by Engineer Co. These are spontaneous rather than organized events. Other departments did not tell me about similar happenings.

V.2.2. St Nicholas Day

The company's St Nicholas Day is also held during the Christmas period, on a day close to the official Hungarian date of the 6th of December. Though indeed associated with the Christmas holidays, the character of Santa in Hungary is not as closely related to Christmas Eve as in Anglo-Saxon countries. His appearance and the moral attributes attached to his character are nonetheless similar, and so is the custom that he gives away presents and fulfils wishes. The company's St Nicholas Day tends to appeal more to families with small children. It is of no interest to the other employees; accordingly, they could not share any related details or experiences, either. The celebration is held during working hours, but on a Friday afternoon, when work intensity is lower anyway. Children receive a gift set, some people do not even attend, just ask for the gifts, this is just another benefit for those with a family.

For years, it has been the same employee taking Santa's role, who by the way used to work for the Development division, and, due to the insourcing of that division, became the employee of Predecessor Co. in 2013. This Santa explained that his behavior and identity was not influenced by the fact that he was the company's Santa, that it does not change the essence of „being Santa”. In my interviewees' reading, St Nicholas Day is a service for the parents who work for the company, the event and the gift set is a benefit or the managers' present. The management does not explicitly prescribe which values and norms the Santa should represent. Children's behavior is, nonetheless, under control – the parent cannot allow their child to be impudent or disrespectful to or in front of their colleagues. Thus there is, after all, a certain sort of latent behavior control due to the company setting. This even makes filling Santa's role easier, as the parent cannot have their child question the genuineness of Santa.

It's way simpler than on the street, we're under controlled circumstances here, I mean, I wouldn't have to stand on the street corner, freezing my tail off, and every other child would throw some snowballs at me, you see, this makes it just easier. So nothing, from the parent's perspective it's a bit of a help that I praise them for something. (...) – And why does the company have this St Nicholas Day? – The company answer is that it's a family-friendly company and then they think this qualifies as family-friendliness, and that's quite right, by the way. (...) It's one of the services the company provides. – Does it convey any values? (...) not necessarily economic values, but moral ones. – No, that's already up to you, the way you experience

it, I think. So he didn't expect me to teach this or that to the children, he couldn't have, either. This formula is way simpler than that, I don't think the management wants that. This let's put down what's good and what's bad thing, this was, well, my idea, 'cause, you see, if we don't even do that, then what's the whole thing about. (Santa Claus)

Hancock (2013) points out, nonetheless, that the acknowledgment of Santa's self-identity is not a given, but depends on whether the Santa can earn it and become a true Santa. He identified three groups of practices that serve this purpose and are essential elements of „Santaness” as an interactive entertainment service: performative, epistemic and ethical processes (Hancock 2013). These techniques, reviewed in more detail below, could be observed in the company Santa's activities, as well.

Santa's wearing a red dress, putting on a fake beard and maybe also a fake pot-belly are all **performative practices**. The company Santa puts less emphasis on these, yet of course he still wears a dress, a fake beard and a basket. As soon as he puts these on, he becomes Santa, and cannot afford to be put off by any emotionally upsetting occurrence (Hancock 2013).

Each time, we were afraid she [my daughter] would recognize me. The thing is I don't have more than one pair of winter shoes, especially not that I would wear for St Nicholas Day only, and she recognized me by my shoes. And I knew, too, that that's an issue, but can't come up with anything. So there she was, my daughter, standing in the line, and the other two were there, too, but they are younger, and she's saying to her mother, Mom, his voice is like Dad's, and well, his shoes, too. Let's ask Dad tomorrow if it might have been him dressed up as Santa Claus, but she's never asked. So that's it. By the time she got there, she hadn't recognized me, asked her to tell me who she was, and then she just said: this can't be Dad, Dad would surely recognize me. Well, next year, I'll definitely not take on the role towards my own child. (Santa Claus)

The company's Santa attaches importance to „performing” something, being entertaining, and being able to keep the audience's attention. This element of the „service” is also addressed to the parents, not just the children.

And then the big day came. When it was only the parents gathering up there, I dressed up, I managed to get into a good mood, no, I don't mean any chemicals, it's just that I, well, prepare for it spiritually. Then the guy who organized the whole thing entered, they sang, and then I entered with a huge basket. Sure, the company prepared a bag for everyone beforehand, I also had a big basket, and a cart, 'cause I just couldn't fit in, and then there was the extra present, the singers, those doing some acting, who was charitable, who prepared. And then I entered and a sort of interactive Santa Claus joking started, too. This Little-Prince-style, that it's a child, and it's happy 'cause they got the meaning, and then the adult is happy, too, that they got it, and then of course they don't mean the same thing. (Santa Claus)

Another aspect of the essence of being Santa is a sort of omniscience, having transcendent knowledge about the children (**epistemic dimension**) (Hancock 2013). As regards the company Santa, this knowledge resides in the Santa Book. The parents write letters to the company Santa about why he should praise or condemn their children, and also send a picture each.

That's what I thought was the right way, after all, Santa Claus is an educational factor, too. So let the parents write down what they would like us to praise their children for, that I should tell them, stay away from the walls with those pencils little fella, or something; and let them send a photo so I can identify them, so it would really seem I know all about children's lives. We compiled the material into a spreadsheet, cut it out, and I glued it into my magic book. No, really! The magic book is heavy. (laughs) (Santa Claus)

Unfortunately I could not examine the original Santa Book, as it got lost some time ago, but the material from 2011 and 2012 was available. The pictures usually show beautiful, smiling children, which also reflects how we relate to the reality that photographs depict (for more on the topic, see (Sontag 1977)). Parents' characterization of their children focuses on what they can already do by themselves, what they still need to improve in, their good and bad traits and habits. Praise usually relates to some sort of performance: in sports, in studies, in household chores. Scolding generally concerns the lack of independence, throwing a tantrum („*howls if something doesn't turn out the way he likes it*"), sibling rivalry and fighting. Sometimes damages done are also mentioned in a funny way. Sleep and tantrum seem to be critical issues, mentioned by several parents, and food diversity, as well. These are the typical problems that render the everyday „manageability" of children more difficult. In terms of quantity, praise was dominant.

The Santa of Engineer Co. regards the **ethical dimension** to be the most important factor to his own credibility and to the function that St Nicholas Day has in the company. The traditional punishing/rewarding role is also part of his character (see (Rippin 2011)). His original profession was teaching, so his personal attitude most probably contributes to the maintenance of this role, yet it is not at all far from the tradition, either. Parents' descriptions of their children reflect a certain kind of performance orientation, which on the one hand comes from Santa's own request (epistemic factor), yet parents' reaction rather acts to enhance it. According to Santa's report, the expectations and the good vs. bad behavior patterns have their roots in the very depths of social culture, hence are naturally given, nourished by the unquestioned background knowledge of the lifeworld.

So you're asking me who is the one setting the ethical category, what we may praise the child for. What is good and what is bad. (...) At this level, it's still absolutely clear. There's nothing you'd need to contemplate if it's good or not. If it's good or not according to God. The fact that she dresses alone, well it might not be crucial from the perspective of faith or the perspective of God, but it's still good, because it's her endurance, it's her will, 'cause it's her that it all depends on. (...) I've never received anything during the last five years that, after reading it, made me say, like, hey, this isn't something to be praised for, but it calls for a fair bit of scolding. You see, it's always so clear. We had it once, I'm sure it was an average child, and there was a line that he should be praised for this, and that when we have guests, then he should behave like this, and, well, he wasn't even three at the time. But this is about the parent, what they are like as a person, we know the parent, too, but we don't name them, but they are this performance-oriented maximalist person, they'll most probably have their child tamed, with all their expectations. (Santa)

Yet being child-centered is at least as important to him as pedagogy, and we can find some examples where the two goals contradict each other (Hancock 2013). Under this aspect, he mentioned the following characteristics: loves children, gives gifts, sees the child in their everyday life and gives the reward for something specific, which is based on the above-mentioned quality of omniscience.

Someone who likes people, and who loves children, I don't think it was anything special. (...) Just that you know about them, you pay attention to them, that they can feel that they didn't get that bag of sweets because it's St Nicholas Day, but because this Santa Claus, he knows about me that I help, say, help my mother. So, like about keeping account, I know this isn't real, so, that it's related to love, not to me, nothing more special, that's it. (Santa Claus)

With the growth of the company, the quality of its St Nicholas Day has significantly changed, as well. The company's Santa, too, reported that it has become impersonalized, turned into a sort of mass production. He found it was more and more difficult to build an actual relationship with the children – or the parents, for that matter. Control, as well, has become harder to keep.

Then, as the number of children grew, it wasn't that great, 'cause you know, if you keep a child occupied for twenty minutes, then it's a good kid already, then you're a capable guy, and then it was a free-for-all, you had problems with discipline. That one probably wasn't good any more, when I felt that it wasn't good. But this year's was an occasion utilizing all the lessons from previous years, where we had, in parallel with my Santa Claus activities, craft workshops running, which kept the children occupied. And also, you know how children give performances, Jingle Bells for the fortieth time already starts to hurt a bit, but then again when I'm happy for my own children, I'd still listen to it, and after all that's what it's about for the parents, that they see their own children (...). So, because of that, it's a kind of service to the parents. (Santa Claus)

But Santa Claus made it through all the children without a word of complaint. That is, they had a chat, one child came after the other, hello, whatever...(laughs) That was nice, he made it through to the very end. (Roland)

In summary, the meeting with Santa has the function, for both the parents and the children, of looking back on and evaluating the past year. In addition to being a form of entertainment, the company's St Nicholas Day opens a reflexive space that provides opportunity for the parents to identify efficient behavior patterns (from a pedagogical perspective), to formulate their pedagogical goals, while for the children it creates motivation for behaving in conformance with the norms (compare (Habermas 1981, 170)). That is, through their St Nicholas Day, the company contributes to the reproduction of the lifeworld, but this event – in contrast to the Christmas party – is not dominated by corporate performance or the promotion of the values that the company culture is built on.

V.2.3. Script Elements of the Corporate Christmas Party

This subchapter provides an overview of the recurring script elements of corporate Christmas as a ritual, the set of symbols they are associated with and the layers of meaning they carry.

Engineer Co. has had a Christmas event each year ever since it was founded. The way these parties were realized was greatly influenced by the traditions of Predecessor Co. and the owner's expectations. Even though organizing them is HR's task – at least it has been since the HR role / department was established –, the coordination with Peter has always been very close in this respect. The Christmas party usually takes place on one of

the last workdays, which is a conscious decision from the owner's side. One of the reasons is that even those working on longer foreign projects should have returned to Hungary by then and would thus be able to participate; the other reason being to hold the celebration as close to Christmas Eve as possible to ensure a genuine Christmas atmosphere. It begins around 7 PM and lasts until dawn. The script is more or less the same each year: the management greet the participants, the first item on the agenda is managers' speeches, followed by the handing out of awards and presents, dinner, music and dancing, interrupted by the lottery, and then further music and dancing. Every employee is allowed to bring a plus-one to the Christmas party, who tends to be their current partner, but sometimes it is a sibling, a friend, an adult child or an ex. Guests numbered around 630 at the event in 2012. Figures were not available for the preceding years. The choice of the venue is a very important symbolic element of Engineer Christmas, therefore this will be the first aspect we cover.

V.2.3.1. Outward Impressions: Venue and Appearance

Traditionally, the **venue** of the Christmas party has always been some elegant, exclusive building. The specific location has been changing through the years with the growth of the company. My interviewees named the following as past venues: library of the Academy, Institute of the Hungarian Culture Foundation, Hotel Gellért, Buda Castle, Museum of Natural Science. Based on the photographs, the company's very first Christmas dinners were held in some elegant restaurant. In the last two or three years, Engineer Christmas took place in the New York Palace Hotel.

Peter attaches great importance to the choice of the venue. All the managers agreed with him that elegance is an important aspect: the venue must be one that you – i.e. the average employee of the company – cannot frequent every other day. He said he always strives to make sure that people get the best quality on these occasions.

People usually live more modestly than that, the company Christmas shall be special. (Peter)

These are always at places where we don't usually go during the year, because that's not our usual environment. (...) after all, there is an atmosphere, there is an elegance, there is... and of course that comes with a serving there, a choreography, that gives a certain image to the whole thing. The company's values are visible there, too, when you actually have to say thank you to the employees for their work throughout the year, then the company really puts an emphasis on this. (...) Well, the gravity, that we consider this important, and we provide for a truly special venue, a professional service organized to the detail, and that is, too, why we ask the employees to arrive, like, dressed in a way that matches the intimacy, the splendor, the quality of the event. And I'm thinking that, sure, it is greatness and strength that these things reflect, but this is not what Christmas should be about in my opinion, but rather that it should be nice and worthy of the company, but I don't think we'd want to show off our strength by this, 'cause I don't think so. (Ferenc)

Through his choice of elegant venues, Peter also aims at counterbalancing the alleged general belittlement of the engineer intelligentsia. Furthermore, part of the owner's aspirations is to lift the attendees into an upper layer of society; thus regarding the event as a demonstration of prowess – ruled out by Ferenc above – does not seem to be totally wrong after all. What is more, some of my interviewees also reinforced the notion that this is part of the company's employer branding.

(...) he is trying to make it reflect that the company has been growing and how big we are, and sell the image that the company is successful. (...) [Previously] there was no need for this, to retain people like this, by giving gifts, and we are the stars. It was just there, and we had it from Predecessor Co., too. And then it dawned on Peter, if they do it, we do it, too, and it's mutated into this, that we are at the Boscolo. (...) If we wanted people to really have a very good time then, possibly, this would not necessarily be the most important aspect. But, well, if the goal really is to astonish them a bit, then this is the way to go. (Mirtill)

One of the interviewees thought that all this has its roots in Hungarians' typical mentality of „let's celebrate like the high society does” or „we can only do this once, but let's give it all that one time”. Which suggests that social pressure, too, is a factor in the high standards of the Christmas party.

It was quite a fancy place. So I was surprised, like, wow, not bad. It's interesting to see how much more Hungarians go for elegance than Germans do. Here they spent a bit more money on it.(...) Call me black-hearted but I think Hungarians are more the type to, well...show off. Then we think that this something we deserve. This isn't very characteristic of the managers themselves. But rather of society as a whole, of course they won't stand out, if all the prosperous Hungarian companies go to such places, they won't have their Christmas party in a bowling alley, either, so that's why I think this whole ostentatiousness of Hungarian society might even be part of this difference between Germans and Hungarians. (...) I'll show you that I have the money, that I can afford it, whereas otherwise [I can't], and this is, maybe, already more characteristic for the lower layers of society. In fact they can't afford it, but they're trying to keep up appearances. Yet this should be clearly distinguished from the company event where they actually do have the budget for it, yet this ostentatiousness is still present somehow. (Ödön)

To the interviewees, the elegant venue and the related services mean that it is important that they „treat themselves to the best” at Christmas, that the company „spares no expense” in hosting them. These expressions were used very often. The following respondent phrased it in a funny way:

You asked me why my wife wouldn't [come], she for example doesn't like ostentation, and why they don't give that money away. Whereas I think, well, that this much one should, yes, let's relax a bit. Of course I had a different approach during the socialist era, back then you spent the entire day with your co-workers. Today, too, but I have a different perspective. So I think it's good and yes, let's have it [corporate Christmas party]. Let's give it all, getting drunk halfway is money wasted! (laughs)(Jenő)

Peter also introduced a performance motive to the layers of meaning of their choice of venue: as long as the company expects their employees to deliver high performance, the company, as well, ought to aim high in organizing the Christmas party, and vice versa, the venue symbolizes the level of professionalism that the company expects from its employees in their everyday work. That is, in Peter's wording: Engineer Christmas also reflects the company's values (professionalism); while in a critical reading: under this

aspect, corporate Christmas turns into an expression of performance orientation, as well. Peter mildens „ostentation” to „pampering”.

The fact that it's held at New York Palace, isn't that veneer? – To me, by the way, the New York did represent value, not necessarily the veneer, the way it was done. It's important that, you know, we ask the employee to always perform at 120%, or at least in terms of quality, only the profess...you know it's not by coincidence that our first value is professionalism, and New York Palace and the service they provide is professionalism. So, that yes, this is what we, too, expect, what we see there, this is what we need to do, what we receive on that one occasion each year. I call this pampering, that is, one may have oneself pampered every now and then. We are not showing off, as we don't usually invite any clients, so the leaders of the most important, the biggest clients, there are sometimes a couple of guests each year, either because we think in strategic terms about them, or because it's important that they get a feeling of the spirit, the atmosphere of the company. If it's important, we do have guests, but otherwise we don't, as we do this for ourselves, I'm not sure it counts as showing-off. No, I didn't feel it was, and I don't feel that way now, either, when thinking back on it. (Peter)

One aspect of this performance motive also appeared in the employee interviews: the company spends so much on the Christmas party because that is their way of saying thank you for the entire year's work. There are some further customs associated with the „thank you”, which will be discussed later on.

Closely related to the venue is the **appearance** that the management expects from their employees. When characterizing the corporate Christmas party, one of the first things mentioned was that it is held at an elegant venue, dressed in elegant clothes, which ensures the festive atmosphere and that it is not just another regular day.

Actually, this has always been something of an elite day for the employees, everyone had been crawling around with a screwdriver in their hand, installing things, and on these suit-and-tie occasions it was nice to see my colleagues, all appearing in fancy dresses, with cute partners, wearing nice clothes. (Bálint)

Well, basically, you don't go there in your everyday clothes, as you'd normally go, and not with everyday thoughts, either. So I don't just go to the Christmas dinner the way I'd go to the office each morning, but to a certain extent, as the holiday is approaching, everyone is trying to get into the mood. Oftentimes it's not that simple, either, but, that it's usually the last workday, and then something comes, something begins and something comes to an end. (Attila)

Getting dressed is a rite that is also an element of preparing and tuning up for the corporate Christmas party: it is not just the dress that the attendee puts on, but a different mood and attitude, as well. The formal attire is also a costume/mask at the same time: being employed by Engineer Co. means that the employee can have a taste of the elite. In reality, however, they cannot afford such things – for they cannot frequent a place like that every other day –, it does not become part of their self-identity, only as an Engineer employee. Thus through the venue and the related services, their association with the organization offers a temporary role and identity to the employees that is sufficiently appealing, yet practically unattainable in their everyday lives outside of the company.

The evaluations claiming „ostentation”, „showing off” or „pretense” in fact represent the debunking of this mask. Along with the dresses, employees also „put on” certain expectations: elegance comes with a given type of behavior, plus Christmas is regarded

as the feast of love. Of course, people limiting their expression of love to this period only is a frequent point of criticism. At a corporate Christmas party, there is the additional layer of meaning that the right thing to do is to be friendly to and behave like ladies or gentlemen with all your colleagues, even those with whom you are not on the best of terms otherwise.

I feel the whole thing is a bit of a pretense: everyone looks very fancy, sure, of course, that's part of it, and then everyone loves everyone else for the time being, and that's not necessarily the way it usually is. (Rita)

The dress code is such an important element of the culture that even though employees of other cultural backgrounds have made suggestions to change it, the HR department is consistently blocking those attempts.

And Christmas, the very reason I like it is that it's an elegant thing, and it has its own spiritual atmosphere. By the way, there have been attempts, one or two colleagues suggested, who were with us temporarily only, from another organization, why don't we make a jeans Christmas, 'cause with this amount of people finding an impressive venue, well, that's not that easy, and it would be way cheaper and more easy-going. Actually, this request, this suggestion of the guy, I have not yet forwarded to Peter, well, this was three years ago. (...) I haven't, the reason being that, the way I see it, it's good for the employees, too, because they dress up. That is, a software developer comes to the office wearing jeans, a shirt, if it's such a day, or a t-shirt, but this is different. Here, I think, you need to have the right setting for Christmas, and the other thing is that, actually, the acknowledgement, and you can have a good time wearing a suit, too. And women are women in a slightly different way on these occasions. So I wouldn't like to lose this kind of atmosphere, and then again, if Peter, if that's his will, well, then there'll be no way around it, then it won't be like this, but I think this is the way he likes it, too. (Zsuzsi)

Part of the outward impressions associated with Christmas is **decoration**. Engineer Co., however, pays hardly any attention to this aspect. There was a Christmas tree in the hall of the hotel, and Christmas decorations on the floors, yet that was the hotel's call. In the rooms where the Christmas party took place, no Christmas decoration was to be seen at all, and it was not characteristic for the company's offices, either. In previous years, when there was a seated dinner, some of the tables did have a bit of Christmas decoration. It used to be Peter's express wish not to have a Christmas tree. He told me the following about this:

E.g. I used to be against having a Christmas tree. (...) There wasn't one this year, either, 'cause they've got used to me being against it, and by now I've come to the point that actually it would be good to have one. I believed the Christmas tree to be veneer, historically it didn't even exist until the 1870s or what, and I think it's a misleading veneer that we've got the time to decorate the tree, buy it, make it, and all, but we possibly didn't have the time, this lasted like two hours, to play with my kids that same day for two hours. And what I see more and more is that indeed we are prisoners to our many possessions, which robs us of more and more time. It's just that one thing we don't have time for: the other, the human. (Peter)

Thus Peter derives his feelings against the Christmas tree from our dependence on property, on material possessions, which keeps him from using his time according to his own will. As regards Christmas, a similar point of criticism is the must of buying presents. It is quite extraordinary, however, if it is the company's owner that mentions dependence on possessions. The HR and controlling departments made sure to point out that Peter

still keeps the company under manual control, and even though seemingly he would like to hand over the reins, the structural conditions of which he has already established, not much has happened so far in practice. I believe that the Christmas tree is just a projection surface offered by the reflection space that the holiday has opened. For Peter, it is much more his dependence on the company that constitutes an everyday problem. I will give some examples from his speech, as well, and his direct co-workers report that Peter (and hence they, too) does a lot of extra hours. They call it a lack of time, but the essence is the sacrifice of personal, spontaneous relationships for instrumental ones. What is more, Peter has turned the primacy of work into an expectation for his subordinates, as well, which – along with the fact that the corporate Christmas party aims at increasing their emotional commitment – is actually an attempt to impose the same dependence on them. Though Peter is very conscious about his value categories, and strives to remain consistent across his various roles, my intuition as a researcher suggests that this is a case of self-deception rather than manipulation (see the types of Habermasian distorted communication). In fact, Peter told me that he has already revised this view of him with regard to his family, because he realized that the Christmas tree is important to his children, and that maybe it is time for that change at the company, too. How may his „corporate children” relate to the issue?

Some of the interviewees could not even tell for sure if there had been any decoration, while others „pretended” to see the decoration. This is not a question of particular importance to them. Some others, on the contrary, do pay attention – and are either for or against it. Those who miss the Christmas tree and the decoration associate the Christmas atmosphere with these accessories. The decoration of the festive space is one of the rituals that make the profane world sacred at Christmas (Durkheim, 1912 in: Vachhani and Pullen 2011). Lacking these rituals, the corporate Christmas party cannot turn into a sacred space.

I even told the guys, this is like a gym hall, that there wasn't anything. There wasn't a single piece of decoration, a candle on the table, the whole thing didn't have such a Christmas atmosphere because of the room, I think. (Rita)

Now it looked just like a bare room with a couple of tables, but the previous year, the tables were all decorated nicely. (...) and that created such a nice atmosphere, and it was something of calming down from all the rush. (Bori)

If there was a Christmas tree. I can't remember if there was one this time. That's something that could do it. If it was there, it was a little bit different, then I'd feel more like I was at a Christmas party, not just at a „state-of-the-union” event to celebrate the closure of the year. (Ödön)

The opposing view is that such decoration would be unnatural, as a corporate Christmas event does not necessarily need to aim at creating an authentic Christmas atmosphere, because it could never be genuine anyway.

Fortunately, they don't hang Santas and such all around the walls, that is, Christmas isn't visible in that respect, which is good, I think, 'cause I think it would be rather funny if we tried to go down that [road].
(Balázs)

The „Christmas factor” of corporate Christmas will be discussed in detail later on.

V.2.3.2. Greeting

Each year, arriving guests are welcomed by the managing directors at the entrance, greeting them personally with a handshake, pecks on the cheeks and a drink. It used to be Peter and his oldest fellow director, Ákos, who greeted the guests, yet there were already five of them at this year's Engineer Christmas. At the entrance, a waitress was offering champagne to the arriving guests, who then clinked glasses with all the managing directors one after the other (all of whom were men). This gesture also suggests that they are the hosts, they are the ones „throwing the party” (much like at the organization analyzed by Rosen (1988)).

The personal welcome was an obvious element of the event's script to most interviewees, and they felt positive about it. The gesture reinforces the elegance of the venue and attire, it is „yet another way [for the managers] to prove they are gentlemen” (Jenő). The personal greeting creates direct contact with each employee and their plus-ones, which however some might feel uncomfortable with, as not all of them have such a close relationship in their everyday lives. This mainly applies to more recent employees, who joined the company when it was already large.

The first part is a bit official, that's the way it always is, like you enter, and then the managers are all standing there, oh my god, everyone is a bit tense then, that, like, it might not be such a good idea after all.
(Rita)

I liked all the Engineer Christmas parties quite a lot, they were very familial, always began with us entering, standing there, the managing directors greeted us. Obviously, I didn't know them the first time, so good evening, and then they are always smiling, 'cause you know, we keep it informal within the company, but I've never seen him before, have no idea who he is, if someone from Hotel Gellert's staff or so, whatever...
(Ödön)

At the previous Christmas parties, when employees still knew each other, this sort of personal welcome was a more natural part of the Christmas script. The impersonalization of relationships also manifests itself in how the employees perceive the greeting. This is illustrated by the below two quotes, which, though contradicting in terms of facts, arrive at same conclusion evaluation-wise.

I'm sure that at the first one, Peter and Ákos were standing at the entrance and welcoming everyone personally. I even remember, our wives were quite surprised that, like, even to the wives and relatives, hugs and kisses. I think it's pretty sure we don't have this anymore, at the last one I'm sure we didn't. (Pali)

It used to seem a bit more spontaneous, but with a size like this it can't be spontaneous any more, you can already feel it. (...) We arrive and then the managers are standing there, and welcome, whatever, have a good time and so on, that is, even this is already apparent, that it's been set, professionally, while I don't recall such things from the past parties, that it would've been so apparent. (Tamás)

Professionalism, thus, does not appear as a value – as described by Peter with respect to the venue –, but as an expression of instrumentalism. The following interview segment, not devoid of contradictions, gives a debunking reading of the greeting:

But the company is absolutely family-centered, I liked that gesture a lot that, like really, all the management was waiting for everyone, and clinked glasses with everyone, like welcome, nice to have you here. This is very nice, but this was set up. Beyond this you could see that the marketing guys said that whatever happens, you need to stand there, and then with everyone and then it will be fine, and it was fine, 'cause I liked it, but those who think it through, they know that this might have been set up, that it definitely was set up (...) so that it becomes a gesture towards us. Maybe a marketing trick that the management isn't all that distant spiritually as we think, well, whoever thinks that. Me personally, I think I liked it very much, but my brain is aware that I don't know if they would've been standing there on their own accord, but then I think Peter would've done it, yes. (Roland)

Though he interprets the clinking of glasses as the symbol of family-friendliness, which he is happy to identify with, its authenticity is questioned the very next moment, as he suspects an ulterior motive beyond the gesture. That is, building a personal relationship is not an end in itself any more, but a means to an end, which also turns the value of family-friendliness into an instrument.

V.2.3.3. Managers' Speeches

The first point on the agenda of the Christmas party has traditionally been the manager's speech. Peter has given a speech each year from the very beginning, the style and key elements of which have remained the same, yet there have been some changes, as well. With the growth of the company, Ákos, the managing director of Engineer Ltd joined in, and at the event in 2012, they shared the stage with two managers from Info Ltd. Peter's speech was the longest, the one with the most substantial message (those of the others having been rather symbolic), thus it is the only one I will analyze in depth.

Peter started his speech with a reference to the **success of the company**: they have been operating for 11 years, and the Christmas party is telling evidence of the huge growth the company has enjoyed. He said farewell to the division that had been sold to Predecessor Co., wished them success, and strived to underline the upsides of the sale: how nice that Predecessor Co. need them. He did not mention any potential negative consequences of either the sale or their growth. Engineer Co. consciously avoids introducing “State of the Union” functions to the Christmas party, which could provide opportunity for honest reflection. They have a separate occasion for that: Engineer Day in early January.

The Christmas one, that's a more relaxed one, and it's really the good news, the awards and there's a bit more humor and kindness. It is indeed adjusted somewhat to the occasion, the one in January, well, that's, of course you can't exaggerate it and say that, like, in the old socialist days it was always the 2nd of January when the price increases were announced, that is, there we also have some bad news, and I'm not saying threats, but, like, some directives, too. There and then, I wouldn't say the atmosphere is festive and familial, but after all, they aren't torturing us, either. (Jenő)

In line with tradition, the second half of his speech was about **saying thank you to the families**. This he started with an example situation, which, I suspect, was based on an experience of his own (an assumption shared by his immediate co-workers). I am sure it has already happened to most of you – he began – that you intended to make it home on time, but you did not manage due to an urgent assignment. And you did not make it home on time, nor by bath time, and so you did not see your child either in the morning or in the evening. (In my experience, according to business-world standards, it is the bath time by which time a good father should arrive home from work, that is when the father role starts.) He also added that we need to say thanks to the hinterland, that is, to our partners, for the support, who need to be understanding, when we arrive home late from work. This Christmas party, too, is a form of thank you to the partners, for standing behind our colleagues all year long.

This part of Peter's speech was the one that my interviewees highlighted most, labeling it as „thank you”. On the one hand, the thank you pertains to employees' job performance throughout the year and, on the other hand, to their partners „performance” and patience at home, as well. These acknowledgments are a recurring element of Peter's speech each year, which most respondents referred to as an indication of family-friendliness.

*The managers evaluate the year, say thanks to the employees and the **relatives**, as well. The manager's speech is not that much about work, but more about cohesion in the family, about values. (...) What I think is that they thank us for the year's work, that is, there is a framework to it, the story isn't about work theoretically, but still somehow it's the year's work and the performance and energy you had invested, that the colleagues gave throughout the year to the company as added value, somehow about gratitude and acknowledgement. Not just to the employees, but to **their relatives, or wife or girlfriend etc.**, whoever is there in the background, and have to, well, fast because of us. So there are difficult days, and ones overburdened with work, when they have to put up with, come to terms with a lot. So in that regard, it's a gesture towards them, too. (Attila)*

*Peter always says thank you for the year's work to the employees, on the one hand, and also to their partners for their sacrifice when **Daddy, and the husband, and the wife, and the girlfriend, and the boyfriend** weren't at home. (Ferenc)*

*It is a recurring element that family, how important that is, and they always extend special thanks. Because the family members are always there on these occasions, and how much they, too, supported the people, and how much the good employees have been good employees this year again, and that this event couldn't take place if it wasn't for them, that Christmas is a family holiday, and therefore they, once again, say thank you to everyone, **wife, child and the like**. (Balázs)*

Peter, too, underlined saying thank you as a highly important goal: the Christmas party gives an opportunity for him to directly communicate with the partners of his employees and thus to increase their loyalty. This is the official layer of meaning.

Taking a critical approach, it becomes apparent that the way Peter says thank you conveys not even just one, but two concealed messages. One is the normalization of **overtime**, of work overload. Even though apparently, he reflects on overtime and its consequences as something negative, by presenting it as „heroic sacrifice” that not only the „soldiers of the system”, but also their families make for the „sacred mission”, he lifts it into a positive context. As the quotes above evince, the employees regard this phenomenon as obvious, which the manager’s speech reinforces even further. Based on the informal conversations I had at the company, I think this is not a case of conscious manipulation, but rather one of collective self-deception: most probably, Peter regards the situation as a naturally given factor of his own life, and suffers from it just as much.

Some of the interviews, nonetheless, contain mild criticism – none of them is expressly sharp, though. Some speak about this part of the manager’s speech with a hint of irony, some come up with complaints, yet they all still approve of the „thank you”, and regard it as appropriate and justified.

*One of the managers (...) was just speaking about the family, how important the family background is, that us, who are always doing extra hours, I can remember that speech, that for that we need to say thanks to the **wife or girlfriend** at home, not us, that they wait patiently. Me, specifically, I never make it home before sevenish each evening, and leave around six thirty, so I’m away from home more than twelve hours. So I don’t see them get up, all I have is that I make it home by bathing time, so this isn’t okay. Well, whatever. (Roland)*

*It’s a formality, but I liked that part of the Christmas speeches, too, everyone had a go at it whoever spoke. The managers basically sort of apologized, well, they didn’t apologize, they thanked the **partners**. So whoever brought their **wife, girlfriend or husband** along, obviously we can’t shut out any gender, and they said they want to thank for the lot of patience they exhibit when we go home late. I can particularly appreciate that because it’s what 90% of all conflicts in my life come from, that I arrive home late. If at least I arrived home late from the pub or something similar. I’m sure they planned it in advance (...), but I still say that this occurred to them, well, they’ve got to pamper the slaves’ souls, but let them pamper, I agree with that. (Jenő)*

The other concealed message of the speech is the reinforcement of traditional **male vs. female roles**, through which it contributes to the upholding of patriarchal social patterns. In this part of his speech, Peter told the story of a man, described everyday hard work from a man’s perspective, and said thank you on behalf of men to women, who are at home with the children, are patient and support men from the „background”, so that the latter can deliver a uniform performance. This can be partly explained by the very low proportion of female employees at the company, i.e. this is the perspective of the majority, and what is more, the managers are males, as well – plus, Peter’s story was based on personal experience. It is, however, one of the purposes and duties of critical research to also consider the perspective of the minority, what is more, to amplify it and to present

alternatives (Alvesson and Willmott 2003b), and therefore I will devote an entire separate subchapter (V.3.1.3) to the gender topic.

The third part of Peter's speech was about their corporate social responsibility, which rather meant **charity** and sponsorship. At the same time, it served to emphasize the financial and moral greatness of the company: we are successful and we can afford to share our success with others. He kept referring to the sponsored ones as if they were members of the corporate community, or rather: corporate family. For example: „we have a sportswoman [nationality and type of sport were replaced by sportswoman] among our daughters”. Their success is the company's success, as well. Sport is an important part of the corporate community's life, too, the company has its own sport club, where co-workers can pursue various sports together. Moreover, as a result of the law on corporate tax allowances, the company started to support some smaller sport clubs. The related payouts, though unrelated to Christmas itself, are still associated with this period due to the year-end closing, and thus Christmas' symbols cast their „shadow” on these sponsorships, too. It is at this time, as well, that they announce what end the proceeds from the lottery will be donated to.

Being charitable is formulated as an advice – and an expectation – on the individual level, as well. According to Peter, he has been trying to communicate the same message to his employees each year: „be selfish enough to give”, which he usually illustrates with a story from his own childhood.

This is usually a recurring element, by the way, too, my biggest gift is actually the request I make at the end of the Christmas speech: that at Christmas, everyone goes to see someone, take their child, and visit someone that noone goes to see, that isn't visited by any relatives, and I can guarantee that what they'll experience will be their best Christmas present ever. (Peter)

Peter's was followed by speeches from three of the managing directors, all of which were much shorter and less meaningful. Each one of them expressed their gratitude for the family members' sacrifice. Info Ltd's two managers also spoke about the change and the difficulties of their search for an identity. For them, corporate Christmas was inevitably related to the problem of their organizational identity, as until then, they had always celebrated with Predecessor Co. They originally wanted to have their own event that year, but the other managers of Engineer Group voted for a joint Christmas party.

In the end, managers' speeches – Peter's, before all – are key elements of the corporate Christmas party as regards the passing of expected behavior norms and patterns. Peter attaches particular importance to it, incorporates **conscious messages** into it, prepares for it. Previously, if he had the time, he used to visit a good bath still before Christmas, where

he tried to calm down and let go of the everyday rush. One of the reasons he thinks this is important is that people unwillingly adapt to the rush of business life, and take on traits that they do not actually want. He also used these occasions to prepare for his Christmas speech.

Thus the speeches contain personal experiences, personal elements and personal values, as well, are loaded with emotions, though their significance and depth has diminished with the growth of the company. Peter's intention is to lend authenticity to his words through the use of these very elements, yet at the same time they also raise **doubts**. The following quote reveals the contradictions of this situation:

[Peter] used to [tell] quotes, not entire poems, but he liked to, some part of a poem matching the topic or the get-together, but not anymore. He didn't do it this year any more, for sure, maybe not even last year, maybe the company is too big and he doesn't know everyone that much, or there's some other reason. But it used to be recurring. (...) I don't know [what they were about]. He has an emotional approach, I'm sure that at Christmas, he is talking about love, if it was a company day or similar, then cohesion, togetherness and the good feeling. So it's usually some emotional motivation. (...)

Managing director, owner, whoever, whom we primarily consider to be an engineering expert, and businessman, primarily, and the first time he recited a poem, I found it quite strange. (...) 'Cause, to start with, everyone is an engineer, and it's not that typical to publicly attach emotions to things, and even regardless of any poem, Peter likes to emphasize the emotional part, how credible and authentic people find it, that's a different piece of cake. (...) I don't find it problematic, but the naysayers think a man of such serious business achievements can't be emotional. Well, we know that in order to take care of business interests, profits and all, he probably can't show too much empathy and things towards the partners and the competitors, 'cause that wouldn't take him too far, probably. Regardless, it's possible that we have this within the company, but there is no denying, either, that if someone needs to go to X [country in the Far East], he sure sends them there. (Balázs)

Authenticity is questioned on two levels. The first one is whether it is possible that someone actually behaves differently within and outside the boundaries of the community, which is the „real” face of the leader. That is, the questions raised concern Peter's self-identity. This is the same dilemma as the one Peter referred to when he spoke about adapting to the rush of business life; which is in fact based on the generally accepted belief – shared by my interviewees, as well – that business life is about fighting, and thus ethical and/or empathic behavior is doomed to fail. Which then again goes against the values of neo-Christianity as the religion of love – the values that Peter, too, represents, and which permeate Christmas for so many –, as the concept of brotherly love requires the same attitude in every situation. This is why participants perceive Peter's Christmas speech to be inconsistent with his being a businessman.

The reference to the „unrefusable foreign assignment” he made in his last sentence, however, evoked doubts on another level, as well: is it possible at all for true solidarity to exist between management and employee? The tone of the owner's Christmas speech suggests that this is a community built on reciprocity, trust and love, and that the same

applies to his relationship with his employees. Terms and conditions are, nonetheless, set out in work contracts, there is an asymmetry of power between them and they perform contract work – that is, their everyday life is dominated by the calculative approach.

V.2.3.4. Awards

Each year, managers' speeches are followed by the awards ceremony: the **newlyweds, the newborn Engineer-babies, the first retiring Engineer employee and those who had a jubilee** (have been working for the company for 5 or 10 years) all got an award. At the 2012 party, the HR manager introduced the ceremony by pointing out that Christmas at Engineer Co. is traditionally about the family, and therefore they would like to welcome the couples who had married and the Engineer-babies that had been born in the course of the year. They showed a picture of each couple and baby, and called them to the stage one by one. By the way, these photos are also displayed in the floors of the HR department. The newlyweds receive a wellness weekend getaway for two, while those with a baby get a voucher for a baby shop, a playsuit with the company logo printed on it and a magazine subscription. The presents are procured by HR, but it is Peter who makes the decisions.

Peter, obviously, approved practically everything almost up to the finest details. There was a set of ideas, and he picked the ones he liked, or didn't like, for how much, but to the point, like, why on Earth would we go for the voucher of the X baby shop, 'cause that's a big corp and stuff, but then you couldn't find any smaller companies that offered baby vouchers. Finally, we went for the X shop, for the lack of another option. (Mirtill)

The newlyweds, let them go for another honeymoon, so to say. Who has a jubilee, let them relax with their partner, and thank you for the work you did. Those with a baby, they usually get a voucher of the X baby shop, so as to help them, and a subscription for a magazine, too, that Peter likes very much, because he said it features very-very good articles, but that was the feedback the mothers gave, too. (Zsuzsi)

The official message that the greeting of the couples and the babies carries is family-friendliness, and that is how the employees interpret it, too. By this gesture, the company shows that it regards family as a value, encourages family formation, and acknowledges it as a valid dimension of performance.

So there was something of a human approach to everything, if during the given year things happened in the life of a family that were important to them, we strived to somehow pay attention, to acknowledge. (...) Advent is a period of preparation to begin with, and that dear colleagues, please do not forget at Christmas time that there was a big change, don't just experience it like well, it's Christmas again, but this is a Christmas like no other future Christmas will be, because this is a first one under some aspect. (Ferenc)

The greeting may be interpreted as a **rite of incorporation** (van Gennep 2007)²⁰, as well: the new family member (spouse, child) is introduced and accepted to the corporate

²⁰ By rites of passage, Van Gennep (2007) means the rituals related to so-called thresholds – e.g. turning points in human life. He distinguishes between rites of separation, transition rites and rites of incorporation,

community. At that moment, the spouses and the babies “get hired” by HR, as well: their photos will be displayed in the floors. They usually refer to the babies as Engineer-babies, and the playsuit with the logo reminds one of the shirts that they receive when they are baptized.

2012 was the first year in the life of the company that someone retired, so this was the first occasion to say goodbye. Peter took the opportunity to give a short speech, thanked Uncle Janos for the work they did together, offered him as an example to future generations, and handed over a „lifetime” access card to him. This clearly was a touching moment.

Traditionally, the greeting of those who had worked at the company for 5 or 10 years would have followed, yet due to their large number, this was postponed to the Engineer Day for organizational considerations, and only the employees of the Development division were addressed, as they were due to be employed by Predecessor Co. as of next year. They considered giving out the Employee of the Year award, as well, but that was also postponed to the Engineer Day, the reason being: the award is related to job performance, thus not appropriate for Christmas. Christmas is about the family, thus it is the boundaries of the family that the company tries to extend to also include the workplace community.

What I think is that this is much more something for, well, that I stick with the company. It's indeed about loyalty, and the gift is about that, too, that not just the employees, but they actually get a present for two, those who have a jubilee. (...) This is always a weekend somewhere, and with the partner. (Szandra)

To say thank you to those employees who have been with the company for 5 or 10 years for having spent quite a part of their lives there already, and it was the success of this team that they devoted their knowledge, energy and hearts to. (Bálint)

The greeting of those having a jubilee is the acknowledgment of **emotional commitment**, that the employee does not only offer their work to the company, but their heart, as well, as one of the directors put it. For the employees affected, this is an important, honorable acknowledgement. In a critical reading, however, giving out these awards at a company event, in front of the large public of the company suggests that loyalty is an expectation, an example to be followed.

V.2.3.5. Dinner

The speeches and greetings were followed by a buffet dinner: after all, eating together is an element of almost all celebrations. Just like the venue, the drinks and the food offered

which are related to the preliminal, liminal and postliminal phases of the transition, respectively. The rites related to marriage and birth qualify as rites of incorporation.

were of a high quality, as well, which the employees seemed to appreciate. It is of great importance to Peter that the food matches the concept of an elegant, elite Christmas and that it provides a **gastronomic experience** that his employees are not treated to very often, for which reason he gets personally involved in composing the menu – the head of the catering company is his personal acquaintance. The menu reflects Hungary’s Christmas traditions: fish courses, dishes with poppy seed and cabbage rolls have been there on the tables every year. The offer of alcoholic drinks is dominated by the company’s own wines. We will take a more thorough look at the role of alcohol in Chapter V.2.3.7.

The 2012 event differed from previous years’ parties insofar as they offered a **buffet dinner**, instead of a seated meal. The reason was, obviously, the increased number of participants – there simply was no room for so many seats. The photos from previous years’ parties show elegant tables, chair covers on the chairs, low-key decoration on the tables. Everyone sat wherever they wanted. People usually sat with the ones they worked with or were on friendly terms with.

Us, who have done several things together this year, it will be us sitting there together, and, with quite some people, well, unfortunately with two or three people only, but some private connections have formed, too. Our wives know each other, the kids know each other, obviously we’ll be getting together with them. (Pali)

The buffet dinner prevented people from forming small „communities” around each table, as it used to be the case on previous occasions. Accordingly, the quality of the conversations that people had and the depth of the rapport between them had changed, as well, i.e. this was yet another manifestation of the growth-induced impersonalization process. The opportunity to connect with more people was, however, perceived as an advantage by the employees.

This buffet dinner thing, this, too, was rather nice, 'cause it was way easier to circulate. Nonetheless, you couldn't chat like you used to, at least that's how I felt. So far it's always been like us sitting around round tables, and then you sat beside someone, and you could have a deeper conversation with them, a bit more, like, personal. And now, just ten people standing around that small table, it's all just superficial small-talk, that seemed a bit odd to me. (Mirtill)

At this year's get-together I really liked, because everyone eased up really quickly as they simply had to walk around, there was no seating, it wasn't, like, everyone sitting. People were mingling much more instead, there was far more movement. Whereas getting to know the family members, for example, that got more superficial. It used to be large tables, us sitting around them. Usually the individual departments were sitting together, along with the wives, maybe even some children, if they were a bit older. So you could get to know your colleagues' family better when it was seated, as opposed to this last time, when, nonetheless, everyone got acquainted with way more people. (Balázs)

V.2.3.6. Lottery

The lottery tickets were sold by the girls from HR, they cost 500 Ft a piece in 2012. The majority of the prizes were the gifts that the managers received from business partners. Whereas the first prize was a **wellness** weekend getaway for two, the same that the

newlyweds got. The majority regards the wellness weekend as another expression of family-friendliness (voucher for two) and pampering. Yet in a critical reading, wellness itself also aims at maintaining the job performance of the employee's body (for a criticism of wellness, see (Cederström and Spicer 2015). At Engineer Co., this present rather relates to the intended feeling of luxury and elitism (see venue), as only those above a certain income level can afford wellness tourism (Cederström and Spicer 2015).

To Peter, his managers decisions if they „donate” their gifts for the lottery is also an indication of how committed and reliable they are, and to what extent they follow their joint decisions. Business gifts are not considered personal gifts, as they are meant to address the company – so it is the company that decides on their use, too. Also, this rule – which is quite common at other companies, as well – is a means for Peter to prevent business gifts from becoming vehicles of excessive influence (see page 146).

It has been a recurring element lately, for example, to put those gifts up for the lottery that we received from others. This is interesting, by the way, too, when you see that some do not donate it, as if they hadn't received, if they can make it [to that level]. (...) That's a good measure for, that otherwise you see that you did not get anything from someone: they either did not get, or have not yet made it to the level that, like, it may well be a nice wine, or an interesting gift, but this is the decision we made. This is the joint decision of our community, which I stand up for and stick to, 'cause if they aren't doing it this time, how could I count on him executing some other joint decision of ours. One that does not require them to give up anything. (Peter)

Proceeds from the lottery are donated for some **charitable purpose** each year. Usually it is Peter and the managing directors who make the final decision on what it should be donated for, but sometimes it was put up for vote among the employees. Interviewees mentioned a school and a children's / babies' asylum, while in the last two years, the company provided support to one specific family with seven children. This decision, as well, reflects that Christmas is considered to be the children's holiday, that it's them who should receive gifts from the adults.

We always pick someone, this is the first time it's a specific family we donated the prize to. So far it's always been a children's home or children's boarding institution, infants, or school. Once it was the X Infant Care Center, we personally brought the stuff to them. You've got to know it's not money that we give. So there are the proceeds, and Peter follows the principle that it's not the money these people should see but rather some sort of useful object. It's just that, when we had it the first time, I solved it by calling them and asked what they need, given the amount of money. Us turning up with the umpteenth book or breast pump, well, that might not be of value to them. Of course it is of value to them, they are grateful for everything, it's just that it's not as useful as if you actually go there and then... You wouldn't have thought that that's what they need and they were extremely very happy and extremely very grateful for it. And this year, well, this family, 'cause they have seven children you know, and the gentleman wrote an email and sent it to about two hundred firms. A heart-rending email that whoever can should please help with even the smallest of things, and we were so to say eager to use the opportunity that ours is the only company that actually replied and we started to collect internally. (Zsuzsi)

These donations are important to the employees, as well, for they become part of the gesture of giving gifts through them.

V.2.3.7. Carnavalesque Elements: music, dancing, alcohol

Throughout the rest of the night, a band was playing, and people were dancing or chatting. All along, the buffet offered cakes, and both alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. The dancefloor was occupied by couples most of time, it was rather rare that a larger circle would form. The reason was, partly, that the **band**, which by the way had been a returning performer at Engineer Co's Christmas parties, played the sort of **dance music** typical for balls and weddings (in fact, the band had been hired for several Engineer weddings before). Would there have been a DJ playing modern music, the dancefloor would certainly have looked differently. That is, the night was built on the notion that everyone would bring their partner along. Whoever did not, found it harder to get involved in the dance, and their chances of being left without someone to chat with was higher, as well – as they did not share a table with anyone whom they could have returned to. As is to be expected from a good host, the group's managing directors strived to ask each one of their more immediate female co-workers to dance. The singles rather stood by the oval tables and chatted with others.

This is how it works, and when it all turns into an I-feel-good mood is when the entire party has passed this I'm-dancing-with-my-partner thing, and that happens around 3-4-5 in the night. At least I think it is dawn when it all turns into a joint party, and not before. When all of you have already got rid of your inhibitions. To top it all, the fundamental problem here is, too, that this is an engineering firm after all, with lots of single boys and very few single girls in the company, and it's basically not bad for the single girls 'cause they are being asked to dance all the time, it's just not certain that this should be a basic requirement on such an occasion. (Szandra)

One of the managers plays the trumpet and it had become a tradition for him to join the band sometime during the night, which usually signals the climax of the party. At this point, a couple of employees usually join in the singing, take over the microphone from the band's singer. A number of respondents mentioned men's joint dance from some years before, when, with guidance from the same manager, they gave a folk dance performance. That case had become a symbol of the workplace community and the informal relationship with managers.

It's feelings I cherish from the past. I like the rushing crowd, that I'm among acquaintances, that wherever I turn I have someone to say hello to, and they say hello to me, as an acquaintance, too. This is a very nice feeling, and I could also highlight dancing all together, hooked up in a circle. I still remember, we danced the czardas, or what, with Peter, two or three of us striking each other's shoes, now that was fun. That was nice. (Pali)

The following quote provides a good description of the Christmas party's carnivalesque nature:

Christmas, well yes, we like wine, beer, wine, schnapps, we like to sing, dance, have fun. So it's also a bit of letting off steam, so that we actually see that the other one knows how to have fun, too, they can let go, too. There isn't this compulsory protocol tenseness, like I'm the project manager here and you're just some employee, actually everyone is equal on the surface. (Bálint)

Celebrating, eating and dancing together creates the impression that on that single day of the year everyone is equal. Thus Engineer Christmas as a carnival, too, fulfils its role to actually reinforce the corporate hierarchy through this single night of „sanctioned unruliness” (Rippin 2011; Rosen 1988). On that occasion, everyone shows a face different from their everyday character, which people had become used to. For this transition to happen, **alcohol** is an essential accessory.

Obviously, as a result of the alcohol, too, people ease up, even if they don't indulge too much, and then all the co-workers are somewhat more direct, so this is an upside, by all means. (Jenő)

It's unbelievable, but they created a fantastic atmosphere [the band], we were completely having fun, the Jägers and schnapps kept coming, and it was nice. Otherwise, the night wasn't all about drinking, but rather that this is the first time that I have colleagues, (...) who are my friends, too. (Roland)

Yet getting relaxed with your fellow workers is not the only „commandment”: this is still your workplace, after all, thus maintaining a certain level of **self-control** is necessary and expected.

Me personally, I wouldn't get drunk, and wouldn't let go of myself that much. Somewhere in my mind I still know this still is a workplace, where, in my view, there are limits, and there are constraints, and I'm having fun, but wouldn't get drunk. Actually, I don't usually get drunk otherwise, either, but I'm not sure I would let go of myself as much as I do in my friends' company. After all, it's still a bit official, in my opinion. And, also, I think it really rather resembles a wedding party. (Bori)

Respondents could not tell me any particularly interesting stories related to the Christmas party; if they did, it was some anonymous story about getting drunk, presented with the appropriate level of discretion. Some people breaching the norms is fine, until it does not get too common.

And why would they be interesting as an interviewee? – Well, I don't know, 'cause I think they were the strangest person at a company Christmas party this year, otherwise they are an incredibly friendly person, there is this type of people, who turn strange if they have some drinks. – What do you mean by strange? – They turn aggressive. – And this is not quite usual. – At a company event, no, it's not quite usual. We hope that when we noticed and from that point on we tried to keep talking to them. We hope they didn't try to hurt too many, not physically, they would've been incapable of that, they were just insulting people verbally. (Balázs)

V.2.3.8. Christmas Presents

The employees get some kind of Christmas present each year. At the 2012 event, the gifts were handed over in the cloakroom, upon departure. The branded gift bag contained a towel with the Engineer logo on it, a pocket knife, a bottle of Engineer wine, sweets and a business card holder. A constant element in previous years' gift sets was the Engineer wine, and the towel was a recurring piece, too. In the year when the company won the Bike Friendly Employer award, employees got a bike backpack, a hi-vis jacket, a bike tool set and a helmet. On two occasions, they received company-branded quality watches, which my respondents found particularly memorable and which some had been wearing ever since.

Thus the company is relatively generous to its employees at Christmas. Who then again regard the presents as a sort of benefit, a reward for their work throughout the year, which they appreciate, but do not perceive as a „true” Christmas present. They captured the difference through the following characteristics: **company presents are uniform and not personal, not the result of lengthy preparation, are not packaged „like that”, handed over in an organized fashion and not personally.**

That isn't such an intimate present, either, you took it from someone whom you don't even know. Sure, it's the company that gives it, but it's not the same. It wasn't meant for you, it was adapted to a corporation's needs, so you don't even need a pocket knife... It's not a personalized thing, just symbolic. That I got it, that's quite nice I think, 'cause lots of firms don't have it, and their people are complaining like, you, you shouldn't complain, 'cause how nice, you at least got something. But it doesn't bear comparison with the gift-giving at home, when you prepare for it, for several months, what the other one would like, this they'll surely find useful, you know they would like it, but they'd never buy it for themselves, or whatever. (Rita)

Yeah, sure, we do get a present at the end. That's rather just a nice feeling, but basically a symbolic thing. As everyone gets the same uniform pack, I couldn't say it's personal, it's a nice feeling, and you're happy about it, it's a positive thing, but I wouldn't connect it to when you give a personal gift to someone or get one from someone. (...) – So who is it that receives the present? It's not Tamás, then? – It's the employee. That is, we're happy you belong here, let's have it like that in the future, too, but not me specifically, but who I am at the company, that's who. (Tamás)

The company's Christmas present, therefore, serves to reinforce people's sense of belonging to the organization and their workplace identities, which identities are not, however, their „true” selves. The company gift reinforces the employee's workplace identity by picturing a uniformized, performance oriented individual without an autonomous personality or any particular attributes. The bike-related gifts conveyed expectations and values, as well: it is only a fit body that can deliver proper intellectual performance (see wellness), and one needs to keep up with changing times, with the wave of environmental awareness.

V.2.3.9. Script Elements of the Corporate Christmas Party – Summary

The table below provides a summary of Subchapter V.2.3: it shows the specific manifestations at the Engineer Christmas party of the individual script elements of corporate Christmas as a ritual, and the messages they carry.

Table 9: Script elements of the corporate Christmas party

Script elements	How does it manifest itself at the Engineer Christmas party?	What message does it carry?
Venue, dress code, decoration	elegance, professionalism luxury, lack of Christmas decoration	employer branding, Engineer-identity the venue cannot become a sacred space
Greeting	male managers, as hosts, greet the guests	the employee is the guest, they are at the center
Managers' speeches	topics: company's successes, saying thank you to the families, charity work	overtime is normal reinforcing male/female roles
Giving out awards	greeting newlyweds, newborns and those retiring	rite of acceptance strengthening emotional commitment
Dinner	gastronomic delight Christmas dishes on the menu buffet dinner	Engineer-identity continuity of tradition depersonalization
Lottery	managers' business gifts as prizes charity donation	employees become part of the gesture of giving presents
Music, dance, alcohol	couples' party releasing tension	exclusion of singles doing away with hierarchy and rules
Christmas present	impersonal, meant for the employee, not the person	strengthening the belonging to the organization, image of the uniformized individual

V.3. Layers of Meaning of Corporate Christmas

Based on the interviews, this chapter will present the sets of meaning that employees attach to corporate Christmas. In the end, the coding process outlined three main topics that participants' interpretations of corporate Christmas were centered around: family, gift-giving and carnival. I will strive to present both the literal and the critical interpretations of these meanings, and to also point out how the various management tools interfere in the reproduction of the organizational lifeworld through the system of distorted communication. That is, I would like to reveal both the explicit and the latent functions (Rosen 1988) of corporate Christmas ceremonies and rituals. In doing so, I will also rely on what was said in the previous chapter, and will re-interpret – where relevant – the events of the corporate Christmas party by incorporating their broader (organizational and social) context in the analysis.

V.3.1. Family-friendly Workplace and Work-friendly Family

The most important official message about corporate Christmas that the owner, the managers and the HR department all promote is that Christmas is about the family, and thus the corporate Christmas party is about the family, too: one more thing that proves that this is a family-friendly workplace. Professional and corporate matters belong to the Engineer Day. Almost all my interviewees repeated this message, mostly with full conviction, some of them exhibiting some doubt. Thus the root metaphor²¹ of Engineer Co. is the family, just like it was for the company analyzed by Rosen (1988), which has multiple layers of meaning.

V.3.1.1. Together Like a Family

The family metaphor pertains, on the one hand, to the **intra-company community**. This is the meaning they imply when referring to the Engineer Christmas party as a get-together with your colleagues, as a team building event. In the owner's words, the Christmas party is an opportunity for employees to meet up outside of their jobs, and to also share the holiday with those with whom they spend a great deal of time during their everyday lives.

In fact, it's more than one third of our lives that we spend with this community. I'm not saying one half, but somewhere in between. And one source of our happiness, ideally, after the family is work, which simply must give you joy, at least we should make it to the level that everyone is doing something that gives them joy and that they like doing it. Now the people for whom this warrants the common joy throughout the year, those I really think should be allowed to celebrate these joys in such a community once. Or to have their partners get to know this community, this joy. I'm not even sure I've ever thought about this before, that this is a great fact that in the end we spend a whole lot of time on work and very-very little time on celebrating together. This, now, is the occasion. – Why do you need to spend time on celebrating together?- Because we weren't born to work, but we work to make a living. And this is part of our lives. That is, in order to be able to live, you've gotta be able to feel joy, to celebrate, to forgive and to say thank you. And at Christmas, you can do all this at the same time. (Peter)

The above quote is a formulation of not only the meaning of corporate Christmas, but the work-related management ideology, as well. For Peter and his fellow managers, their jobs and the workplace is a source of enjoyment, as well: for employees at higher levels of development, it is not only the usual strategic, calculative relationship that attaches them to their work, but positive emotions, too. One of the managers even put alienated, „just-for-the-money” work into a moral context.

*[For] those who see it [the Engineer Group] as a multinational or large corporation, it's a source of income: I work to have money. I don't work to create, and then I'll have some money. This is, maybe, what shows rather well what each person is doing it for, if it's their **heart** that drives them, or the need to have money. Those who do it for money, they are whores, if you'll pardon my French. Noone should despise*

²¹ The root metaphor is a metaphor that pervades the entire discourse, and largely shapes our preliminary understanding of any particular situation (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000).

*prostitutes, either, caused they, too, only do what, so that they have money, that's what they have for sale. Others sell their mother, so what, what's the difference? Nothing. – And then you strive to hire employees who... - Who would like to do this, not for the money, but because that's their inner drive. Anyway, you can't motivate by money, and that's why you need to find the job that'll bring inner joy for the person in question, through which they can actualize themselves, where there is **a fire burning in their soul**, and it's burning by itself, and that job can fuel that fire. 'Cause if it can't, then that fire will burn for something else, it won't be burning here, it won't be able to completely burn there, either. And that's of no use to anyone any more. (Bálint)*

The above quote basically describes the **ideal-typical case of self-actualization**, and at the same time sets it as an example for what is morally good and also as an expectation towards the employees. That is, it expects an expressive attitude to work, which eliminates, on the level of one's personality, the rift created by the separation of system and lifeworld. This view also reflects the ideology of soft HR: the company wants not only the body, but also the heart and the soul of the employee for itself (Willmott 1993).

Basically, you also need your partner to be able to do a good job, you can't split a person in two halves. It's bullshit when they say [that] when you arrive, leave the private stuff at home, and when you leave, then leave your work here. They want to turn us into a schizophrenic, but that's not working. (Bálint)

Thus in the management's interpretation, corporate Christmas is the celebration of a community who are capable of sharing with each other the joy that their work brings them, who can exist as a full person in all spheres of their lives. The sentence of Peter that contrasts work with „life”, and refers to Christmas as an opportunity for life apparently contradicts this „fullness-requirement”. He describes „life” as the domain for spontaneous joy, reflection and moral behavior (forgiveness, gratitude, common joy). Even though everyday work leaves no room for all these, the corporate Christmas party contributes to the fullness, to the maintenance of the expected moral relationship to one's work and workplace; and it does so by blurring the boundaries between work and private life (see (Fleming 2005)).

The contrast between everyday work and the holiday was present in the employees' interviews, as well. These phrases reflect the function of the holiday that allows for the suspension of routines, the counterbalancing of one's daily life (i.e. work), and the experiencing of social relationships on a different level. That is, the role of corporate Christmas for the employees, too, is to reinforce their bonds with the community.

Does it, then, make any sense at all to celebrate Christmas together at the company? - It does, because that night isn't about work, but about, well, let's celebrate, I don't know, how Christmasy that is. A company day, by the way, is different, yes, we get together the same way, we are clinking glasses the same way, and chatting, and yet this one has a certain atmosphere. (Roland)

I'm not looking for any ulterior motives. Maybe there are some, but maybe Peter likes to see his flock all together, this whole lot of people, clinking glasses. A simple, decent, large gathering of people, as if you were attending some great public party. (Jenő)

The Christmas party gives an opportunity for attendees to meet up with co-workers whom they cannot see during the year, because, for example, they work abroad or were relocated

to another company/office in the course of the reorganization. It is mostly those who have been working for the company for a long time that attach importance to this aspect, as they have a wider yet tighter social network. The party also allows for spending time with one's friends from the workplace. These smaller circles of friends would, nevertheless, organize themselves even in the absence of a corporate party, what is more, they do actually go out together sometimes.

However the interviewees also attributed business benefits to the Christmas party in defining it as a **team building** event. They seem to be working on the assumption (quite common – yet debated – in soft HR literature, as well) that the strengthening of co-workers' relationships with each other results in improved individual and organizational performance (Legge 2006). There are no explicit team-building activities or games, though, which are rather typical for other companies' Christmas parties. The reason is that everyone can bring their partner along to the party.

Yet the company, why it does it, the company, like everything else, out of vested interest, yes, sure, this one they do out of interest in the good sense, too, either to make their employees feel that they are a community, a group, a team, and surely it is in the company's best interest, which might be even realized in terms of economic profit, even as a, say, team building activity. (...) After all, any alternative program that is not just all about work and at the workplace, that already strengthens this, just like a team building event may strengthen. (Tamás)

In summary: it is this facet of the Engineer Christmas which reflects the latent function described by Rosen (1988) most: the ideology that the **intra-company community is a moral community, as well**. The Christmas party does not reinforce one's membership of the organization in the Weberian or Taylorian sense any more, but suggests that this is friends celebrating together, who love each other (Rosen 1988). In reality (i.e. everyday life), however, organization membership is not just about moral relationships, but at the same time, it is also a legally regulated instrumental relationship pervaded by interests. Nonetheless, the 'team building' reading does also challenge the family metaphor, as it implies Christmas becoming a tool, accompanied by a consciously managed form of community building instead of spontaneous self-organization (see Chapter II.2.2.2). According to their own account, employees' relation to their employer and colleagues is way more superficial than the management ideology would suggest. Which clearly is a refusal – a literal one, in some cases – of the family metaphor, and an expression of their opposition to the colonization of Christmas.

That's not like the Christmas you have at home, 'cause Christmas is the feast of love and family. And your workplace is not your family. It might be your second home, 'cause it unfortunately is, and unfortunately you spend more time at the office than at home, but you can't substitute your family as far as Christmas is concerned. Now, if it's Christmas or not Christmas, well, it's still not a company day. It's got something to

do with Christmas, sure, but it's not about the family, but about your co-workers, the company, on the occasion of Christmas. (Roland)

V.3.1.2. Like One's Extended Family

The management extends the family metaphor – and hence the boundaries of the organization (see (Deetz 1992) – to the family and relatives of the employees, as well. In a sense, the company becomes part of one's **extended family**. As regards the Christmas party, this engulfment is furthered by the rule that allows a plus-one for everybody, which in practice usually means their partners. In connection with the owner's speech, we have already discussed how partners are acknowledged and how the incorporation into the community of the newlyweds and the newborns occurs. The family being the root metaphor necessarily brings about the seeping-in of the parent-child relation, too, into the company (Rosen 1988): Peter, the owner, is the head of the extended family, who fills the role of the „Father“. This inherently asymmetric relationship also acts to reinforce the corporate hierarchy.

So for us, [Christmas] at home is already about the children. Here, it's about the colleagues, I almost said, our children here. (laughs) (...) At the previous Christmas party, I was one of the employees of the year, and it's always been me handing over the awards, and then Peter took the microphone from me, and then he said that the mother of all of us, and then for half a year, everyone just called me Mum. So actually sometimes I have a slip of the tongue, and say: kids. – And by the way, symbolically speaking, who is the father at the company? – Well, everyone's dad is Peter, in my opinion. (Zsuzsi)

There [on the 24th] the immediate family, whereas here your quasi extended family, this is absolutely common to everyone. And you have that feeling of togetherness at both, in a different setting, obviously, and to differing depths. (Attila)

The presence of employees' partners is meant to dissolve the boundaries between work and private life, to make people bring along a slice of their extra-company lives and identities. This way Engineer Christmas, which takes place outside of working hours, does not tear away the employee from their family, like other corporate Christmas parties do; on the contrary: it brings the family under the temporary supervision of the company. The interviewees did not, however, cross a certain limit: the corporate Christmas party did not give them the same intimate experience as Christmas Eve usually does, and vice versa, they did not let go of themselves completely, either.

This was partly due to the participation of their partners, the presence of whom imposed certain limits on their behavior. The partners need to be looked after, as they know a very few people only, so one cannot just immerse in conversations with their co-workers. Male-female chats and teases remain more temperate, and married men tend to consume alcohol in more moderate amounts.

I have this sort of ambivalent feeling about the Christmas party, party, well yes, that's the point, that it'd be a party if it was only us, co-workers being there. Then you could get drunk, and you could party, and

all. But, obviously, you don't do all this in front of your wife. Especially not in front of the other's wife. Yet at the same time I know who those two or three people will be with whom my wife would have a chat, and she doesn't really have too many other options. (Pali)

When a guy has his girlfriend next to him, it's not quite sure he'll behave towards you the same way he does when it's only the two of you. During the day he might come over to have a chat, do small-talk, but there, they are just cold. And I think you can notice that sometimes. (Bori)

With regard to Engineer Christmas, all these factors prevent from occurring the unruliness, the overturning of the world and the invalidation of norms and rules that would otherwise constitute the carnivalesque facet of a Christmas party (see (Rippin 2011; Rosen 1988), and which the participants would indeed like to enjoy. All that is out of the question, at least for those with their partner in attendance, for which reason some do actually decide not to bring their partner along, and then report a complete lack of stress at that year's Christmas party. As we will see somewhat later, the Christmas party means something different for the singles, for those arriving alone.

V.3.1.3. Reinforcing Traditional Gender Roles

The way the company applies the family metaphor at the corporate Christmas party, and the related practices and value messages implicitly reinforce **traditional gender roles**. At the Christmas party, this manifested itself the most explicitly in the owner's speech, which was discussed in Chapter V.2.3.3. In summary, Peter pictured a **family model** in which the man is the active worker, who often works overtime and spends little time at home, whereas the woman ensures they have a warm home, takes care of the children and patiently waits for her husband each and every evening. The one-sided male perspective of Peter's story was remedied by one of the directors of Info Ltd, who said thank you to both the wives and the husbands for their support, which sounded rather awkward in that setting – that was when I became aware of this aspect of the organization's culture.

My interviewees' choice of words was rather diverse. Many of the male respondents referred to wives or girlfriends only, as I pointed out with respect to the quotes in Chapter V.2.3.3. Some others used the word partner, and so did the female respondents. By the later stages of my research, highlighting the wife or husband, or using the words family member and partner had become more typical, which I believe might have been partly because word may have gotten out that I had mentioned the gender topic in all the interviews. Of course it is absolutely possible that respondents would have used gender-neutral wording regardless.

The fact that Peter acknowledges the sacrifice on behalf of men suggests that this is all that wives can contribute to the company's success and society's reproduction. The

opportunity to attend the Christmas party is a kind of compensation or present for the partners in return for the hardship they endure, and an acknowledgement for their background role. Yet at the same time, the acknowledgement reinforces that very background role. The employees seem to have internalized this argument: none of my interviewees questioned the authenticity of Peter's speech, nor did they debunk the latent norms it reflected. The interviews with both the members and the leaders of the organization outlined a fairly conservative picture. The second respondent below, for example, gives a particularly apt deconstructive reading of the owner's speech, which he then goes on to rationalize.

*Basically I think it's good if he/she [the partner] also sees the background of this organization, its motives, the managers, their approach to things. This way they, too, can get somewhat closer to what they had a negative experience about, from the other side. What they experienced through their partner not being there, or not being there when they were needed most, or being there less. **What I mean is that if there's work, work comes first for a lot of my colleagues.** Until a point that's good, and then obviously beyond a certain point it's not good, but you need to be on the other side of it, and always see that, and that's even worse. **Being, so to say, at the mercy of the company, and now they either need my husband or they don't, either he comes home or he doesn't.** It makes this a bit more transparent, more understandable, and it helps to express the gratitude that the management invites the partner or family member to the event. (Attila)*

The woman needs to be the hinterland, why couldn't it be the other way round? – (...) ***in fact a dinner like this would be strange there [at a workplace that primarily employs women], like, we welcome you dear husbands, who have supported them from behind.** That's a fact, that it would sound weird. **But I don't think it's necessarily a problem that it is [like this].** By the way, I don't know if all women have an issue with this. That is, my wife, for instance, is the typical example of who'll never be disturbed by this, 'cause she needs it. She likes it this way, that she's in the background, she has a qualification for a profession, she has a degree, but I think if she'd never have to have a job, if she could spend all her time at home with the family and take care of the kids, that would be very okay with her. So she's absolutely not the careerist type. Whereas for a careerist woman, whose goal in life is to become the top manager of a company and be admired by two hundred people, or twenty thousand, for her, this sentence might be quite painful, but my wife, she may indeed take it as an acknowledgement. (Pali)*

This family model, clearly built upon the traditional gender roles and in line with Christian-conservative values, is further reinforced by the division of tasks in organizing the Christmas party. It is the female HR employees and the secretaries who are answerable for those. Naturally, their male co-workers help out sometimes (e.g. when physical strength is required), yet the responsibility for the smooth flow of the entire event lies with the women. At the Christmas party itself, the HR manager and the lady in charge of the preparations take the role of hostess, but they stay in the background most of the time. During the speeches, the HR manager was standing at the side of the „stage” and making sure that the course of events followed the agenda, while the organizer lady did the announcing. The spotlight was on the male leaders, the hosts: they welcomed the guests, they gave the speeches, they gave out the awards, they shook hands with the employees.

And is there a difference between the roles of the host and the hostess? Because it seems that HR is the hostess after all. – *Yes, yes, there certainly is, it's Zsuzsi's team who, from the background, that everything*

runs smoothly, pay attention to everything. While Ákos and the others [leaders], who make the speeches, put in a stronger, more obvious appearance, and they maybe, sometimes, maybe sometimes they can even relax. Zsuzsi and the others, I don't think so, chances are rather thin. (Tamás)

The hostesses, thus, ensure that the „family members” feel at „home”, the same way as it is **women's duty** in their private lives, as well, **to take care of the preparations and household chores related to Christmas, to set up and transform their home for the holiday** (Vachhani and Pullen 2011). Christmas ushers back even the modern, working woman into the private area of her home, elevates household chores into a privileged position, and therefore during this period, the meaning of being a woman and the construct of the set of subjective experiences related to being a woman are particularly exposed to the influence of social, cultural and commercial powers (Vachhani and Pullen 2011). The way the mass media behaves at Christmas normalizes the position of the woman in the family as a system, thereby contributing to the reinforcement of traditional female roles (Vachhani and Pullen 2011). In obedience to this “natural” role, year by year it is with great pleasure that the main organizer of Engineer Christmas takes on the duties related to the party, and thus voluntarily accepts the (not absolutely inherent) background role associated with it, just like her co-workers. In this organization, men and women both contribute to preserving the oppression that results from these traditional roles. My female respondents did not even really criticize the status quo, they were more concerned about the distinction between productive and unproductive areas and the horizontal segregation behind it.

The division of labor with respect to the Christmas party is the reflection of the everyday division of labor at the company: productive areas – as the corporate jargon refers to them – employ men for the most part, while unproductive areas (HR, accounting, marketing) are typically operated by women. The **effects of horizontal segregation** added up with engineer-elitism places women into a secondary position in the organization. It is rather this dimension of discrimination that women are aware of and complaining about: that their own areas of expertise cannot be equal in value to engineering areas.

*You know, if we measure this at our company, 'cause you know, they measure it externally, 'cause here, a woman is a woman, and it absolutely works out, in terms of the benefits package, everything. By the way, in the **backoffice functions**, mainly, women aren't typically discriminated in the productive areas. I think that even here, it's mostly not being a woman itself – though that's part of it, sure –, but that this is a support function, and this company is led by engineers. So here, it's the engineer who knows everything best. „(...) we know, Peter, I'm not an engineer, and even less a male!” So it's indeed very typical, if you take a look at the managing directors, maybe XY (newly hired managing director) is not an engineer, and otherwise all of them have an engineering degree. (...) It's absolutely typical that HR, when I took it over, the management's order was, about what and how HR should do: patting people's heads. (laughs) (...) And it is apparent that it actually is, that HR makes nice events, cares for the employees' souls. These are the expectations they set down. (...) So there is you, we're very happy to have you, you add color to the*

company, that's the attitude, more or less. Some fully accept women, too, as partners, but that's just the minority. (Szandra)

In the engineering areas, the company actually **takes measures against horizontal segregation**: they would like to change the male vs. female ratio, therefore they favor female engineers over male ones. Also, they joined the Girls' Day initiative, which is meant to make technical and natural sciences careers more popular among young women who are yet to choose a vocation. The all-male Developer Division, sold at the same time when my research took place, was headed by a female engineer. Employees opined that she also served as a showpiece for the company. Furthermore, they support the employment of pregnant women by offering part-time jobs to them (though „part-time” often remains a promise only). These initiatives contribute to the elimination of horizontal segregation, which is the first step towards changing long-petrified male vs. female roles. On the whole the **company's gender-practice is contradictory**: in line with the current trends, they strive to support women's careers, the management has been taking expressly progressive measures in this respect, yet at the same time the conservative values that dominate the corporate culture severely limit the potential liberating effect these might have. Managers and employees both relate to gender roles in an ambivalent way, and mostly they are not even aware of that. At the same time, corporate Christmas as a ritual affects the unconscious, and that effect, as we have seen, tends to reinforce – rather than weaken – traditional gender roles.

V.3.1.4. A Christmas of Outsiders

A concealed message of the family metaphor is, furthermore, that it **equates the ideal and normal way of life to living in a marriage and with a family**. Corporate communication and events are addressed to those having a family or living in a heterosexual relationship, and push everyone else to the periphery. They are not meant for the singles, the divorced or LGBTQI people. In this organization, being single is an inconvenient state that needs to be rectified. In an official interview about diversity, for example, the HR manager (along with the HR managers of several other companies) discussed seniority only, without mentioning any other groups having protected characteristics. In addition to the Christmas party, several other practices of the organization support this norm, as well.

Are you allowed to take your partner to the Christmas party? – Sure thing, everyone can bring another human being. (laughs) – That sure sounded nice. – Of course, women bring their boyfriends, while man bring their girlfriends or wives, sure. This is a family event. (Robi)

To him [Peter], children are particularly important, so the idea he has in his head is that everyone should marry, and everyone should have a child, and, as far as possible, everyone should live in Hungary. (Szandra)

My own experience was that with the Christmas party focused on couples and families, being alone I could not really get involved. Due to my role as a researcher, I attended the party alone, which was a conscious decision: I wanted to concentrate on my work, on observing and not just enjoying the party. Which turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy: I consumed the dinner alone, and as I did not want to disturb the couples, I found it hard to start conversations and could not join the dance (Chapter V.2.3.7); on the whole, I could not truly participate in the event. The situation changed when we passed midnight: groups of singles started to form. It was this experience that called my attention to how it might feel not to belong to the majority in this company, i.e. not being a white, heterosexual (preferably Christian) male who lives in a relationship. (My situation was further worsened by the fact that I had fewer acquaintances among the attendees than the average Engineer employee.)

Peter attaches great importance to acknowledging employees' partners, and to greeting their spouses and children because „the **ideal employee** has a wife, house, car and two or three children”, and thus is, he assumes, satisfied, loyal and reliable, „does not make hasty moves” and delivers uniform performance. In other words: the ideal employee shares the managers' conservative values, family matters do not distract his attention from work and he is dependent on the company in financial terms, because he needs to support his family and maintain the expected standard of living (house, car). This expectation is further reinforced by the other managers, all of them are married with 3 or 4 children, and most probably own the appropriate real estate and car. They have all been working for the company for several years, except for the newly hired director of Info Ltd.

I think my fellow managers, too, strive to radiate this. If you count how many kids the members of the management have between them, it's far above the Hungarian average, so the average here is approximately above 3. We're setting an example, in a way, and of course then I feel it myself, when you suddenly have to get home, then I won't say he went home, yesterday, too, always, then what ... (Ferenc)

Am I right in feeling that you share conservative values here? – You're absolutely right, yes. Which, by the way, I'm perfectly fine with, of course there might be some who aren't completely, but I think whoever doesn't share these conservative values, they aren't disturbed by it that much, because it doesn't impose any limits on their values. Of course he won't, if you'll pardon my French, a faggot won't get some award because he, what do I know, managed to find a partner, or when they'll be allowed to have children, then...so yes, these conservative values are there, and I don't think they discriminate anyone negatively. But one thing is sure, the majority of the people whom I've worked with at Engineer Co., they do actually like these values. (Ödön)

Supporting a family and **having children** is interpreted as a **performance to be acknowledged**, manifesting itself in the awards given to newlyweds and newborns, and for example the plans to amend the remuneration system. Peter wanted to introduce that

employees should get an additional 2 percent of their salaries after each child. The scheme was not implemented in the end due to the recent reforms to the Hungarian taxation system, which now favors families with 3 children and a high income to the extreme (it was a conservative government that passed the law). Another factor meant to help people found a family is that co-workers are not considered off-limits, but on the exact contrary: workplace romances are accepted and encouraged, for it makes the „extended family” even larger and the attachment even stronger.

If I have some success in the family, one of my sons won a prize at the maths competition, then I publish that here at the right place. Obviously not to the entire office, but there is a smaller circle with whom you meet day by day. (...) And there's nothing better than families being formed within the company, so that not only is a child born at the company, but the both the mother and the father work for the company. (Ferenc)

Peter is always emphasizing this, that the family. There was a family day when Peter summoned all the girls working here: „Well, girls, which one of you's gonna give birth?” and that was an outright positive experience for me. Because the message wasn't that okay, don't go on maternity leave, Jesus, and what do I know, but that the family is indeed a very important part, and actually if you take a look around here, you can see it on the billboard, too, that this is a decisive thing here. (Zsuzsi)

Out of my 19 interviewees, four revealed that they were single, and two of them were relatively open in discussing the topic. **Outsiders react** to this normative pressure in different ways, which I could best capture through their behavior at and evaluation of the Christmas party. For some, the solution was to leave early or not to attend the party at all. Others brought a plus „someone” for appearance's sake – it might have been a friend, a very recent partner, an ex-spouse, a sibling or other relative. The point being that some sort of partner is necessary in order to fully participate in the event and to avoid becoming an outcast. Once, the whole accounting department agreed that they would not bring anyone along to the Christmas party. Of course, there are some for whom the partner-topic does not pose a dilemma or an issue to be addressed, and experience this dimension of family-friendliness as an opportunity rather than normative pressure.

*For me, what blew a fuse was that you must attend with a partner. No, you don't have to, but you almost do have to. Several people brought a person who wasn't actually very close to them, wasn't their partner, either, but still, need to bring someone, so they did. Ági brought one of her friends, Ilona her ex-husband. I could have brought ten people at least, too, but I think that **would've been a lie** to myself, too, **to appear with them in tow**, whereas they aren't even my immediate relative or my partner (...) To me, this was very weird, that this is to comply with social circumstances, and expectations, that everyone wants to comply with that you need to bring someone, and no matter how, but they find someone to bring along. (...) And yet I think you need to find such an occasion to meet the other's husband, wife, partner, but I don't think that's the Christmas party. So I think it's the family day. (...) So I didn't like this that much, and therefore I didn't want to go, 'cause everyone's bringing someone, and they'll be chatting with them. Who'll chat with me? Noone, I thought, I'll be all alone there, but I don't want to bring anyone, 'cause there's noone I'd like to introduce to my colleagues, so that woke some fears in me. (Rita)*

The single girls mentioned that to comply with social expectations, that this is a separate topic on its own ... - *Sure, the fact that I brought this friend-girlfriend, it did have a role that then my colleagues won't badger me why I've come alone once again. Yes, it was part of it. For the single girls, I don't know. I think boys take this more lightly, at least me, I can't recall anyone who would've made a fuss about this. More*

like about getting to know from the list which girls were going to come alone, which are singles and which aren't... (Balázs)

At the Christmas party, singles and those arriving with a partner in attendance exhibited differing behavior patterns. Above I have already mentioned what sort of limits the presence of a partner imposes on participants' behavior. The singles, on the other hand, are not faced with such limits. It is usually them who „star” any stories of excessive alcohol consumption, but then they receive „absolution”, of course.

In nearly all of the interviews, I at least touched upon the topic of male/female roles and singles, yet my experience was that those living in a marriage or relationship did not perceive the company culture to be discriminative at all under any aspect, many of them did not even understand my questions at first. Their responses reflected the normalization of being in a relationship, what is more, the blame was put on singles for the situation they were in.

Aha, but is there an endeavor that everyone should bring a plus one? – There might be an endeavor, but this is the endeavor that's working around the clock in all of us, that I don't want to spend my life alone, but with a partner, and this might surface to a certain extent with respect to the Christmas party, too. Of course it's better if I can bring someone whose hand I can hold, whom I can take for a dance, so yes. (Attila)
They didn't make too much of a fuss about it, but there were some girls, one or two. I don't think it was a big deal to the boys, well, to the women, I could imagine that. Just think about it, you more or less know the entire company, it's not that big yet, if noone has ever crossed your way at the company whom you liked, than yes, that's an issue, whom you should take, if you don't want to alone. (Mirtill)

Both the interviews and my observations showed that women, rather than men, are more prone to perceiving being single as a problem and thus looking for a solution. I derived the following readings of this phenomenon. Firstly, maybe it is indeed the women only for whom this constitutes a problem in the organization. Men tend to be more integrated in the organizational community, for it is them who do the productive work, and they are in majority, as well. What is more, in patriarchal social cultures, it is men's duty to propose to women, men are the active participants while women remain passive, which suggests that single men opt for that lifestyle themselves, while single women „undergo” that state. Which is why it is less acceptable for a woman to be alone. Obviously, these roles are changing, too, yet the above unconscious preconceptions seem to have remained decisive in an environment of such strong conservative values. Finally, the fact that male engineers do not mention being single as a problem might be partly due to the expectation for them to hide their feelings, which is a joint consequence of gender roles and professional culture.

V.3.1.5. Family-friendliness in Everyday Life: Similarities and Contradictions

So far we have been looking at how the family and family-friendliness manifest themselves at the corporate Christmas party and what layers of meaning they carry. We have yet to see to what extent this approach pervades the everyday operation of the company, and whether family-friendliness has any aspects that those without a family find favorable, as well?

When asked about this, all the respondents mentioned the management's communication and company events first – that is, **family-friendliness prevails primarily in the rhetoric**. Upon asking for further specifics, interviewees came up with the following topics. In their eyes, job security is an indication of family-friendliness. Should someone be unable to arrange for someone to watch their child, they can bring her/him to the office. It was women who found the opportunities for distance work and part-time work particularly appealing – which, of course, are not as comfortable a solution as they sound at first. They do indeed help women return to their jobs, yet they require good organization skills and often involve working into the small hours. Many mentioned **flexible** working hours: they can adjust their daily rhythm to the family's needs, they can run unexpected private errands even during the daytime.

For me, this is a big-big advantage, that it's so flexible, and I say if I need to stay until seven or eight, or if I have to stay during some of my holidays, it's still worth it for me. For example it's a big-big advantage for me that I have two small kids, and that I can see them in the morning. (Pali)

I did hear quite a few skeptical voices, as well: „it's exploitation of the worst kind”, „slogan”, „theatrical”. People's workload is not quite uniform across the various divisions. Family-friendliness was characteristic for the branch that was the first to be founded and had just been sold before my research: the Developer division, where people actually reported having worked 8 hours a day, and a good life-work balance. The HR manager also opined that it is the people at the Developer division that Peter's characterization of an ideal employee describes. The situation was similarly favorable at Info Ltd (sold in the meantime, as well), which also typically worked for Predecessor Co. Family-friendliness and the related values had thus been inherited from the pre-foundation era, but have significantly lost in validity and authenticity with the company's growth.

Employees of the other engineering divisions pointed out that there are two sides of flexibility: the employee and their family need to be flexible, too – they are expected to be willing to work in their spare time should the project or assignment necessitate. Long working hours are even more typical at the most recently established division.

I'm telling you, the proportion of males is high here, if there's an understanding, tolerant, flexible family in the background, it's a living that you don't have to worry about, which Engineer Co. can partly provide, well, not for everyone, those who have such a job, well, the differences are substantial, unfortunately. If the family, too, is flexible enough, that can then strengthen each other, if the family isn't flexible, maybe there are [some problems], but (...) Because this sort of great flexibility that Peter and the company, too, require, well, that's really hard to tolerate. Absolutely, I think. (Mirtill)

The owner's speech already reflected the family-friendliness vs. normalization of **extra hours** contradiction. At the 2011 Engineer Day, Peter explicitly stated that one cannot make a living working 8 hours a day only. Coming from the top leader, such a statement puts serious pressure on the employees.

At last year's Engineer Day, to the dislike of many, Peter declared that you'd better forget about the 8-hour working day. (...) Now, declaring this, stating this officially, too, I felt this is almost a moral expectation, that you don't think along the 8-hours line. (Jenő)

Really, right down from the management, it's really this rush for everyone all the time. (Mirtill)

At the same time, this statement also served to rationalize Peter's own situation, behavior and life/work balance. In reality, this moral pressure primarily affects the employees of the back-office departments working in close cooperation with Peter. It is exactly these back-office companies dominated by female employees (accounting, controlling, marketing and HR) where the corporate governance and structural issues that take up most of Peter's time cause the heaviest workload (regularly working into the night / on weekends). In their view, Peter does in fact expect them to keep up the pace with him, what is more, being the creative, willful genius that many believe him to be, he often changes his mind all of a sudden. This practice completely contradicts not only the idea of family-friendliness, but the traditional female role (that, paradoxically, their official communication reinforces), as well; for the women working there do a lot of extra hours and can thus hardly fill the idealized mother/wife role.

Foreign assignments were characterized as going against family-friendliness, as well. Even though those working abroad for longer periods do take their family with them, and the company helps them with the administration, it does not make up for their being torn out of their long-standing social environment.

This is strange, this is a dual thing, on the one hand we're saying how family-friendly it is, and on the other hand the duties and the projects, and the relocations to abroad, those aren't that family-friendly. (Balázs)

We didn't include [in the Family-Friendly Workplace application] how many extra hours we do, and we didn't put too much emphasis on work done abroad, either, that people often leave and for five years and, well, e.g., sometimes together with their family. Okay, well, by the way, we did emphasize that, whoever takes their family along, their family will be quite okay, too [financially]. (Mirtill)

The most important dimension of family-friendliness, which could be equally beneficial for those with and without a family, would be to ensure that employees have a healthy work/life balance. The company's practice in this area is, however, contradictory, and the owner himself cannot realize this goal in his own life, which trickles down to other levels

of the organization, as well. Flexible working hours and job security are indeed beneficial for those without a family, as well, yet extra hours probably hit them even harder: there is no excuse, no force that would pull them home. For these overburdened employees, the authenticity of family-friendliness is lost and turns into an oppressive ideology instead that is meant to conceal the truth.

And those who find it [family-friendliness] theatrical? (...) Well, that we just act as if it was important for us, and that we're only talking about it, and we show the pictures, and clap our hands. Basically there are some who think that everything's about money around here, and that they're just working so that even more would flow into the managers' pockets, and that all this is just garnish, put there just to defuse the issue. (Attila)

In summary, **as a result of this duality, the family metaphor**, which is at the very heart of the corporate Christmas party, **transforms into a productivity metaphor**: it is addressed to those who work in productive areas and have been productive (fertile) at home, as well; and the message is to become even more productive both at work and at home.

V.3.2. Gift-giving at Christmas

The rite of exchanging presents is closely associated with Christmas, and is an integral part of corporate Christmas, as well. The giving of a present creates a social bond between the person giving and the one receiving it through the symbolic significance of the object given, suggests Mauss (1954) in his famous study. The present is a reflection of the giver's social status and the importance of the relationship, and originates an obligation of reciprocity. In the business world, exchanging gifts carries a utility value, but also has social and cultural significance (Lemmergaard and Muhr 2011). The gifts we give also define who we ourselves are and what our relationships mean for us (Lemmergaard and Muhr 2011). Below follows an overview of the various manifestations of the act of Christmas gift-giving at Engineer Co.

V.3.2.1. The Christmas Party and St Nicholas Day as Presents

Employees regarded the Christmas party itself as a present – or, if less spiritually loaded, as a benefit. The management's official communications clearly used the word present. Through the quality and professionalism of the Christmas party, the management also shows how much importance they attach to their relationships with the employees and their families.

This is a good thing, and also that they take us to a place that we don't just visit each day or evening. So this has such a gift, too. (Attila)

Is this [the party] a gift then? – I think that a lot of people regard it as a gift. They usually pay attention that during those acknowledgment speeches there are some sentence where everyone might feel included. I

don't know if they do that on purpose, (...) but I think they do. (...) then everyone has a little personal gift at the end that they can take home. So I think this is absolutely that category, a thank you, or something like that. (Balázs)

On the one hand, the gift is **one-sided**, as the employees do not directly return the invitation to the party (nor any material gifts they receive there). Which makes it similar to the potlatch situation described by Mauss (1954) where gifts are given by the „chieftain” , that is, those with more power are expected to give away presents, but reciprocation is not a requirement. Mauss (1923, in: Lemmergaard and Muhr 2011) also points out that gift-giving symbolizes the giver's superiority, and that if someone accepts the gift without reciprocation of equal or higher value, it means that they acknowledge their inferiority in that given relationship. Upon quoting Offer's (1997:455) words „with gifts you make slaves”, Lemmergaard and Muhr (2011) conclude that the reason why business gifts tend to be of smaller value is to avoid forming asymmetric relationships or putting the business partner in an embarrassing position. With employees, the case is the exact opposite: the Christmas party is also a demonstration of the management's and the owner's generosity and their position in the hierarchy (see the subchapter on the venue). The gift showcases the giver's reputation and status, and hence becomes a **vehicle of employer branding**. The degree of „overspending” also depends on society's norms: Hungarians' „we can only do this once, but let's give it all that one time” mentality probably calls for more extravagance than is the case with other nations, yet this would need to be substantiated by further studies.

It's more about prestige, from the management's point of view. Because we've always had it before, too, and it tries to match that the company's been growing and how big we are, and sell the image that the company is successful. – Sell it to whom? – To the employees. So that you're happy to work, 'cause this is a successful company, stay here, because you have perspective, indeed it tries to improve commitment. Though it doesn't need that much improvement, 'cause our fluctuation isn't that high, but somehow it's about prestige, indeed. (...) when you take the people to a nice place, give them nice food, cocktails, and so on, then they say, like, hmm. (...) They try to keep up this image, that this is a good company, 'cause I think employees often have the impression, when they see, oftentimes, the everyday chaos, that oh God, what's all this tinkering. At the same time we're trying to sell that we are a big company, a professional firm, after all. (Mirtill)

Much like business gift-giving (Lemmergaard and Muhr 2011), the company's gifts to its employees – be that an object or the Christmas party itself – are an attempt to simulate a personal relationship by entering the family's and relatives' domain. Thus its gift-like nature sheds light upon yet another layer of corporate Christmas that is **aimed at the symbolic shifting of the boundary** between people's private and official spheres (Fleming 2005) or, in other words, **between system and lifeworld**. Christmas traditions reflect another facet of asymmetric reciprocity, as well: it is usually children who get presents from the adults, and a reciprocation of equivalent value becomes due only when

they reach adulthood. By adopting the family as a root metaphor, the Christmas party turns into a present from Peter, „everyone’s dad” and the HR employee organizing the event, „everyone’s mom”, which the underage (sic!) employee does not have to reciprocate.

This **asymmetric power relation is eased by interpreting** the Christmas party as a reward or **benefit**, since rewards come in exchange for something: for the work delivered and the sacrifices made, as regards the employees and their partners, respectively.

From other, I’ve heard this [the Christmas party] is more closed, just for employees, and indeed it’s a team building event that happens to take place at Christmas. Here, it’s more than that, ‘cause indeed it’s a reward, an occasion to have fun in each other’s company, everyone along with their partners. But well, just like the paycheck, of course we get it and are happy about it, but that’s for something, our work. This is also part of the package. Sure, the company would keep running even without devoting to these things, but this is an investment just like anything else that’s related to us, employees. (Tamás)

The management indeed expects something in return for the Christmas party: loyalty, commitment and, if necessary, extra hours. The former HR manager referred to the event as a „mood booster”, as did some of the employees: „that’s the least”, „they’ve got to pamper the slaves’ souls”. Once again, Christmas appears as the opposite of everyday life, intended to resolve the work/life conflict that the extra hours cause by dissolving the boundary between people’s work and their lives.

It doesn’t compensate for it, no. The Christmas party, and that the company throws an event, with the family, is almost, I’m not saying expected, but almost an expected gesture from the management, in the eyes of the worker. Working our guts off the whole year, a dinner’s the least, but, well, this is a well-established custom, everyone has some smaller get-together, from the smallest firms right to the large corporations. It doesn’t compensate for us being in here. (Roland)

Employees are expected, though not formally required, to „accept the gift”, i.e. to attend the party. **The refusal to participate is a means of resistance, as well:** the refusal to internalize the asymmetric power relations, the inferiority and the expectations. Both HR and the owner make sure to keep a record of those who have been repeatedly absent from the Christmas party.

This, it is in our heads, sure, who’s been absent from the party for years, we put that into a compartment, we know it, and there’s the other one, who just can’t make it this one time. (...) But by the way, when somebody isn’t committed, within the company, they are usually shifting towards becoming a key figure in professional terms, and these colleagues do not generally commence a managerial career path. Sure, this is apparent, but it’s a complex thing, Christmas is just one aspect of it. (Szandra)

The gift-like nature of St Nicholas Day is not very different from the meaning of the corporate Christmas party. It is a service to the parents that work for the company, the event and the gift bag is a sort of benefit, or a present from the managers. It represents the management’s position and reinforces the ‘extended family’ metaphor by underlining the importance of their relationship with employees’ children and spouses. In this sense, Santa himself personifies the company: he delivers the service and hands out the presents.

Thus Santa can experience how it feels to „give”, which by the way is a central element of the Christmas party, as well. Thus the company Santa, too, represents a sort of gift-relation (Mauss 1954 in Hancock 2013), the essence of which is that the existence and appearance of Santa is a present for all of us in itself. The relationship is mutual: the children receive a cultural icon from a transcendent world, while the company Santa can also actualize himself as a figure who deserves unending and unquestioned adoration from the children (Hancock 2013).

V.3.2.2. Charity

Charity, as another form of gift-giving, is pushed to the forefront during the Christmas season. At Engineer Co., it manifests itself in two forms: supporting select sportspeople and artists and donating the proceeds from the lottery to a charitable cause. The details were discussed in Chapters V.2.3.3. and V.2.3.6. In these cases, it is the company as a collective actor that gives the donation, which the employees become part of indirectly only. They can however participate in charity directly, as well: the HR department makes sure that there is such an opportunity each year. This can be the opportunity to participate in a food giveaway, the Christmas Shoebox Campaign²² or collecting donations for a family through the lottery. The employees usually appreciate the company’s charity efforts, and they like to participate in the individual initiatives, as well (they tend to prefer the collecting of donations, because they can stay closer to their comfort zone). What is more, some even opined that the substantial amount spent on the Christmas party should rather be donated to charity, as well.

Basically, there were corporate social responsibility issues where the company really outdid itself, and that everyone needs to see in positive light. So it wasn’t the topic of hoarding money that was on the agenda [at the Christmas party], but what we donated for even though we didn’t have to, but we did, because it’s important. (Attila)

The making of donations within the framework established by the company **raises employees, as well, to a higher position**, makes them „chieftains” (Lemmergaard and Muhr 2011). This becomes part of the temporary identity offered by the company that the elegance of the Christmas party is also meant to nourish: the company offers the illusion of belonging to an upper layer of society.

²² This campaign of the Hungarian Baptist Aid supports children in need. For details see: ciposdoboz.hu

V.3.2.3. Christmas Gifts to the Employees

At the end of the Christmas party, each employee receives a gift pack from the company; for details, see Chapter V.2.3.8. The asymmetric reciprocity I mentioned with respect to the Christmas party applies to these material gifts, as well. In comparison to the presents exchanged on Christmas Eve, employees found the company's gifts to have been **impersonal**. An impersonal gift given as a routine gesture does not, however, express the same respect and acknowledgment as a personal present does, and cannot raise the giver's status and prestige, either (Lemmergaard and Muhr 2011). Christmas gift-giving in general already carries the risk of becoming an institutionalized, routine-like process, which then robs it of its symbolic value (Baudrillard 1993, in: Lemmergaard and Muhr 2011). This is even more true for the standardized Christmas gifts that companies use, yet I share the opinion of Lemmergaard and Muhr that the social meaning of corporate Christmas gifts can still not be completely disregarded. The employees, too, tend to use expressions like „positive gesture”, „gratifying”, and appreciate that the company „devotes” some money to gift-giving. That is, the present does actually succeed in representing the importance of their relationship. Employees tend to appreciate the Christmas party more than the gift set, as the standardized nature of the latter is much more apparent.

In summary, the contradictions about the company's Christmas gifts originate in the fact that the company is trying to take advantage of Christmas to cross the border between work and private life – yet without success. The modern capitalist society is at that stage in its development at which system and lifeworld have already separated, and the company is incapable of reversing this separation, especially along the company's own interests. Employees' criticism with regard to impersonality signals the limits of colonization.

V.3.3. Christmas Carnival

Employees described the carnival-like nature of the corporate Christmas party by the following expressions: „let off steam”, „fete”, „end-of-year”. This element of corporate Christmas exhibits the characteristics of carnivals and indulgences: it is an occasion of breaching norms under controlled circumstances (Rippin 2011); it is not related to Christmas traditions that much. It is more similar to New Year's Eve, related to the closure of the year as a cultic unit. Music, dance and alcohol are all indispensable accessories, the role of which was discussed in Chapter V.2.3.7. Interestingly,

interviewees **mentioned the carnivalesque character in contrast to the familial aspects or family Christmas, and sometimes to its religious background.** By which they also expressed that for them, corporate Christmas does not carry the same meaning as „true” Christmas does: neither in terms of spirituality, nor emotional depth or the intimacy of relationships. It is through the carnivalesque nature that it becomes clear: in a corporate setting, Christmas can provide a superficial and empty emotional experience only (Rippin 2011).

Nothing, just think of it as if it was a party. It's nothing else actually. Then alcohol consumption becomes more substantial after a point, it's not at all different from a home party, you just need to go there in a suit, there is a hint of family-friendliness there, too, and well, maybe to a faithless person, for whom this is all indifferent, for them this might resemble their Christmas at home, that we get together, eat, give gifts and then go home. (Marci)

Actually I'd say corporate Christmas is a celebration, which happens to take place at Christmas, so it's like night and day. This also comes from that we experience Christmas in a religious setting, while here at the company it's obviously not a predominantly religious celebration. Sure enough, the entire management might still well be religious, but we [the family] take this approach, while there, it's rather a state-of-the-union thing, year closure, celebrating together. So I'd say it's quite far [from Christmas]. (Ödön)

It's not Christmas itself that we should, here, but rather like a year closure, 'cause Christmas, I think that's not a company holiday actually. – And why isn't Christmas a corporate holiday? – Well, what on Earth has got the company to do with Christmas? Zilch. – Why? – Because, on the one hand, it's a religious holiday, and a family holiday. Now, with the company, it's rather that a year has ended. The closest connection I can see is that it almost coincides with Christmas. The two can just be blurred together. (Ilona)

Engineer employees – in comparison to the other Christmas parties visited during the pilot phase – are stricter about keeping to the rules. The venue, the dress code, the displayed elegance call for a more „refined” behavior, and the presence of people's partners also imposes certain limits (see Chapter V.3.1.2). Moreover, employees are quite clear about the party being a company event after all, and do not have absolute faith in there being no consequences. At carnivals, everyone wore masks and thus they became indeed equal for those few hours, yet this does not fully apply to the Christmas party. Eating together, dancing and entertainment, none of which is part of everyday office life, loosen up the hierarchy and counterbalance the everyday instrumental attitude. The „upside down world” manifests itself in the fact that it is the employees that the company Christmas party is centered around, and the management's job is to see to their entertainment, comfort and service, as also described by Rosen (1988). All in all, however, the carnival-like nature of the event cannot unfold to the full.

V.3.4. The System of Relationships Between the Layers of Meaning of Corporate Christmas

Three main layers of meaning of corporate Christmas have been discovered: the family metaphor, the present metaphor and the carnival metaphor. The former two have their

roots for the most part in Christian culture, and it is these two layers of meaning that are dominant, in accordance with the organizational culture. The carnival-like nature, on the other hand, rather recalls the pagan origins of Christmas traditions. The consequence being that while the familial and the gift-like nature reinforce and support each other, the carnival-like and the familial functions rather tend to weaken each other: that is, the protection and cultivation of Christian traditions keep pagan elements from coming to the surface.

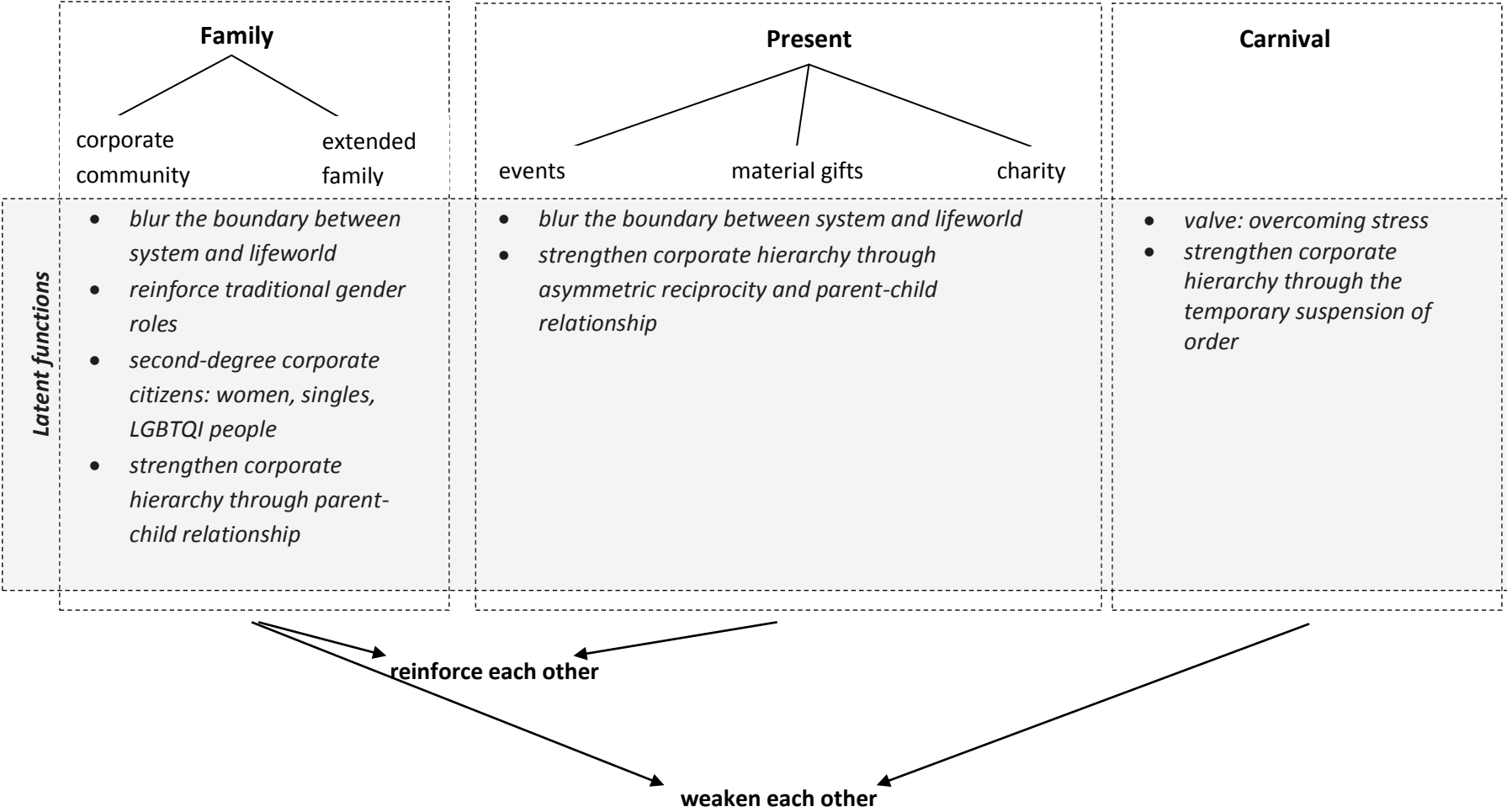
First we will take a look at the interaction between **gift and family**. Both the gift-like nature and the family metaphor (especially its extended family aspect) promote the emergence of a certain parent-child relationship between the management and the employees. Pushing the employees into the child's status solidifies the power status quo and makes it appear natural. At the same time, it also eases its official and impersonal nature, thereby resembling the „tough love” concept criticized by Legge. My interviewees' expression of their ambivalent feelings and doubts about the community and the love-relationship being real are a reflection of the internal tension of HRM, i.e. that the company needs to adapt to the market environment in order to survive, therefore organizational goals must always take precedence over individual goals, yet performance can only be achieved by ensuring the individual's commitment and loyalty (Legge 2005). And one of the tools for acquiring loyalty is corporate Christmas, which, however, is strategized within a corporate framework. Which on the whole makes participants simultaneously believe and not believe in the „family”, appreciate and not appreciate the „presents”: the feeling of a collective identity fades, and the meaning of the gift as a symbol becomes uncertain, too, which are indications of disturbances in the reproduction of the lifeworld.

The parent-child relation may also remind us of Kant's (1980) words: „Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance.” By accepting – what is more: expecting – the present and participating in their common corporate farce, the employees themselves also become a hindrance to their own emancipation.

The relationship between the **family and carnival** metaphors is the exact opposite. The temporary suspension of morality might endanger the family, which effect is however

strictly limited by the opportunity (or as perceived by some: requirement) of bringing one's partner along and corporate communication. The managers of Engineer Co. described the operation of society by an organic metaphor: its basic cells are the families, which help each other and organize themselves into smaller communities, which then again larger communities, like the company, are built upon. Along this philosophy family-friendliness may be interpreted as the management's conscious or unconscious ambition to protect the family as the basic cell of society. Yet what should the family be protected from? According to the management's expressed philosophy: from atomization and alienation as social pathologies. That is, the value set expressed through the corporate Christmas party, i.e. family-friendliness, is a reaction to a crisis phenomenon in the lifeworld; which in turn confirms the claim I made in the theoretical part that the soft tools of HRM are aimed at rectifying any disruptions in the reproduction of the lifeworld.

Figure 10: Relationships between the metaphors involved in corporate Christmas



Even the valve-function – which is a feature of carnivals originally – of Engineer Christmas tends to be dominated by the family metaphor. The company eases the tensions arising from the work-life conflict by saying thanks to and regaling its employees' partners and families, and hence the Christmas party also becomes a field for collectively overcoming any related contradictions and conflicts. That is, the family has to be protected not only from harmful external processes, but from the company itself, as well. This is another internal contradiction originating in modern capitalist society itself, which is further amplified by the contradictory nature of corporate Christmas.

By underlining the ambiguity and temporality of corporate Christmas, the carnival metaphor also unveils the family metaphor: it is only during Christmas time that family comes first, and it is only through its role as a background resource for employee performance that one's family is accepted as a valid constituent of the extended corporate family. That is, the legitimate order within the company as an extended family is determined by people's contribution to its performance. Which underlines the duality of the Engineer-reality, i.e. that family and productivity can simultaneously co-exist as valid root metaphors.

Nonetheless, it applies to all three metaphors – and thus the present study confirms previous conclusions in the literature (Rippin 2011; Rosen 1988) –, that they **contribute to the strengthening of corporate hierarchy**. The family and present metaphors do so by symbolically introducing the parent-child relationship to the workplace, while the gift metaphor adds the practice of asymmetric reciprocity. The carnival metaphor, on the other hand, reinforces the power status quo by suspending the hierarchy for a limited time.

Part VI: Conclusions

This part provides a summary of my study's primary conclusions. The first chapter is dedicated to my findings related to the initial research problem – the colonization and the disruptions in the reproduction of the lifeworld. Which, at the same time, is a summary of my answers to the research questions. The second chapter highlights the most important academic contributions of my dissertation, with respect to both the theoretical and the empirical parts. Finally, the third chapter is a review of the limitations faced and potential future research avenues.

VI.1. The Manifestation of the Tensions at the Border Between System and Lifeworld Through Corporate Christmas

Throughout my analysis of the case study I strived to give a detailed account of the role corporate Christmas has in the reproduction of the lifeworld, and how the system's interests interfere with these processes. I pointed out, as well, the crisis phenomena that can be associated with practices related to corporate Christmas, and the forms of resistance one may discover by observing employees' behavior and interpretations. That is, I used examples and concrete cases to answer the research questions I formulated in the chapter on methodology. It is these conclusions that I am going to summarize and put into new perspectives in the next chapter. At the same time, I will also answer the broader question whether the phenomenon under investigation actually exists: the colonization of the organizational lifeworld through corporate Christmas, and how it occurs at Engineer Co.

Habermas (1981) distinguished between three structural components of the lifeworld: culture, society and personality. Chapter II.2.2 showed us how these structural components can be interpreted on the organization's level. Below I am going to analyze the disruptions in the reproduction of the organizational lifeworld along the evaluative dimensions (Table 6) developed by Habermas.

VI.1.1. Cultural Reproduction: The Loss of Meaning of „Christmas” in the Corporate Setting

With regard to the cultural reproduction in the organization, I focused on the relationship between power-laden corporate culturism and the corporate culture construed by the organization's members in a spontaneous fashion. Will the company make use of the tools of corporate culturism? How will it affect the reproduction of the organizational culture?

The extent to which cultural reproduction is undisturbed can be measured by the degree of rationality of knowledge (Habermas 1981). If we encounter issues in that respect, we are likely to experience a loss of meaning and the questioning of the legitimacy of institutional structures, the previously prevailing behavior patterns and interpretive schemes turn unusable, and the faith in their moral rightness falters. The world of meaning associated with the relevant traditions and symbols becomes inaccessible.

The management of Engineer Co. strives to maintain the continuity of Christmas traditions, for it is possible to take advantage of their community-, motivation-, norm- and legitimation-building capacities only if they manage to transfer the world of meaning associated with Christmas to the corporate world (see Chapter III.3 on Christmas as an invented tradition). Below I will argue that the management fails in this aspiration of theirs.

The Engineer management tries to transmit the genuine traditions of Christmas (i.e. what is characteristic for the Christian culture) by means of the family and gift metaphors: the love-relationship, solidarity and its spiritual content, as well (God sacrificed his only son for us). While the former was an explicit, expressed objective (though in a slightly different, corporate wording: strengthening loyalty) of the Christmas party, the spiritual content „seeped in” only indirectly, through the symbolic act of gift-giving.

Even the owner himself said that corporate Christmas *should* not mean something different than Christmas in general [but it does]. We have seen that its carnivalesque nature and the comparison with family Christmas highlighted the superficialness of corporate Christmas. During my interviews with them, the top managers and the HR managers were working hard to find similarities between Christmas Eve and the corporate Christmas party. After all, it is their role and duty to organize the Christmas party for the employees, and thus role identity requires them to try to attribute a meaning to the event that would ensure continuity. Yet their stories, too, were plagued by contradictions. Whereas all the middle managers and employees, without any exception, drew a very clear line between the two. **They even challenged the name of corporate Christmas: this is not Christmas, that is just when it takes place.** Thus the only common points are the date and the (debated) name. With respect to the Christmas rituals appearing at the corporate event (decoration, dinner, „communities” around the tables, being together), they reported a loss of meaning: the corporate variant is not „the same”. The emptiness of corporate Christmas was further emphasized by the fact that even those who – being

single and/or not Christian – did not even celebrate Christmas at home described the corporate event to have been more superficial as a phenomenon.

And what do you celebrate at the corporate Christmas party? – *Hah, that's a good question. Actually I'm really not on such good terms with anyone, so I like all of them, but there isn't a friend-like relationship that we would go out together with any of them.. (...) So I can only come up with bullshit, I have no idea what I celebrate at the company's Christmas party. (...) But it's definitely not the birth of the Savior that comes to mind with regard to that occasion ... (Jenő)*

It's a tradition we're following here, and not what the tradition was originally started for. (Marci)

Neither the religious aspect nor the emotional community with the family make sense within the corporate setting. However hard the top managers strive „not to 'corporationalize' Christmas” (HR manager), **Christmas does turn into a tool under the instrumentalized conditions at hand**: the managers would like to achieve certain goals with it, and the employees attribute certain intentions to the event's organizers. This manifests itself in attaching business concepts to Christmas: team building, employer branding, strengthening loyalty, benefit, investment – which removes corporate Christmas from under the symbolic sphere. All these impose limits on the internalization of company values: the authenticity of family-friendliness, and that of the company as a moral community gets questioned.

It is important to note, however, that participants' interpretations of Christmas were not as unambiguous as that. The dynamics of the interviews rather imply internal, irresolvable contradictions and ambiguity: Engineer Christmas is indeed about the family (as well) and about celebrating together informally, which the employees do want, too – or maybe we should say that they expect the management to provide it for them. However, if considered from a broader perspective, using an extended interpretive framework, these meanings of corporate Christmas become uncertain and turn into their own opposites.

VI.1.2. Community Integration: Weak Ties in Social Relationships

The relationship between controlled team-building and the formation of spontaneous informal relationships is another important aspect in the analysis of corporate Christmas. In the theoretical chapter, I argued that team-building, especially if realized through informal events like the corporate Christmas party, aims at the controlled creation of what Granovetter (1973) refers to as strong-tie relationships, which is what structural violence in the lifeworld originates from. The research results led me to the conclusion, however, that colonization takes a different form. According to Habermas (1981), the degree to which the reproduction of society – in this case: the organizational community – is undisturbed can be evaluated through analyzing participants' trust in solidarity. If the

stability of group identities is breached, the sense of belonging to the community diminishes, and the members of the community will start neglecting their obligations. Which factors then lead to alienation: complying with the community's expectations is in conflict with one's personal persuasion, and the „true self” separates from the „corporate self”.

The central message of Engineer Christmas is that the most important value is the family as a micro-community, and that the employees and their families are part of the extended corporate family. The purpose of the event is to strengthen the community's cohesion, which is reflected in the official communications and the symbolic elements, as well as employee's interpretations of its meaning. The presence of employees' partners and the acceptance of new spouses and newborns to the community serve to close the gap between the private self and the workplace self. When contrasted with the intimacy of “true” family Christmas, however, the relationships in the workplace community appear superficial, empty and devoid of emotions. What is more, there was a smaller department who deemed the common Christmas party to be expressly pretentious, as workplace relationships tend to be burdened by conflicts.

Now, at Christmas we do as if everything was absolutely fine, absolutely nice. (...) It seems, this is what our manager or our owner needs, and it is through this that he would like make sure that everyone loves each other. (Ilona)

Interviewees reported **the impersonalization of the Christmas party with the company's growth**, which acts to make workplace relationships, which tend to be loose to begin with, even more impersonal. Employees felt nostalgic about previous Christmas parties' spontaneity and contingency, and even the resulting „mishaps”, and contrasted these with the mass-produced, sophisticated and professional impression that the current event made. The impersonalization of the Christmas party is, of course, just a reflection of the everyday changes the company has been undergoing, which face the employees with rather similar problems. The administrative burden is on the rise, and at the same time personal relationships are replaced by bureaucratic and regulated relations, and obligations are laid down in regulations and systems instead of being conveyed by the company culture. **Amidst the growth-induced changes, the authenticity of the family as the root metaphor is being challenged to an ever increasing degree**, and the value of the Christmas party as a present is plummeting, as well. According to the best workplace assessment commissioned by the company in 2011, for example, the organization scored lowest on corporate authenticity.

Even the speeches make the impression of having been scripted, having been rehearsed. Maybe it's also that the managers acquired more practice, but anyway, you could feel that it had been orchestrated: a bit of humor here, this long about that, that long about this. Previously, minor glitches were much more part of the story, and you still did feel that, well, that it was something meant for you. (Pali)

The separation of the working and the true selves transpired in its most apparent form in the case study conducted during the pilot project, where people actually regarded this ability as a condition for survival. The employees of Engineer Co. only implied in a rather moderate fashion that „this is a workplace after all” and „we can't let go of ourselves that much”. Contrasting the emotional richness and intimacy of the family vs. corporate Christmas also acted to reinforce this separation in an indirect way.

The corporate Christmas party is meant to close the gap between the working self and the private self, and to strengthen workplace relationships, trust and attachment, which then again is an attempt to treat the pathological symptoms originating from the separation of people's work and private lives. Employees, however, resist this colonization effort: they do tend to their weak-tie relationships at the Christmas party, but they refuse to make this relationships stronger or deeper, and uphold the rift between their identities. **Weak-tie relationships do not however make for an appropriate foundation for the reproduction of the organizational lifeworld** (O'Donnell 2007), thus they maintain the uncertainty about one's belonging to the community, and turn the company celebration into a collective farce.

VI.1.3. Socialization: Identity Control

The best way to capture the impact that Engineer Christmas has on the lifeworld is probably through its interference with socialization processes. The success of the socialization process may be measured by people's responsibility and answerability. If the reproductory processes are malfunctioning, the motivation for complying with the relevant norms weakens, individuals do not follow the traditions and, due to the unavailability of a mutual agreement, turn to defense mechanisms. All of which acts to hinder the harmonization of community lifeforms and people's personal identities (Habermas 1981).

The HR department provides cultural meanings and symbols, and methods of self-representation for people's individual identity construction (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007) – through corporate Christmas, among others. Firstly, they offer an **attractive self-image** for their employees, which creates the illusion of belonging to the upper layer of society through ostentatious consumption and participation in charity. In that regard, the corporate Christmas party as a ceremony serves to strengthen the „sacred belief”

(Alvesson and Kärreman 2007, 718) that the company is special – which quality then also „radiates” to the employees as individuals.

On the other hand, **there is a row of expectations from the ideal employee attached to this self-image**: loyalty, the primacy of work over private life, self-actualization at the workplace, identification with traditional gender roles, family formation. In an implicit way, the dependence on the material world (house, car, children) also turns into an expectation, which warrants a sufficiently exposed employee for the company. Traditional gender roles further amplify this effect: the majority of the company’s employees are males, whose wage-earner role binds them to the material world, and reinforces the external motivation for work. In my historical analysis of HR, I pointed out that it is when the external motivators (material dependence) cease to work that the soft tools of HR come into play. At Engineer Co., it is this **material dependence** that the image of the ideal employee **is meant to internalize**, and thus ensure/stabilize people’s external motivation using soft HR methods. That is, corporate Christmas targets both internal and external motivational factors.

The refusal of the „elite” self-image so offered manifests itself through the labelling of the corporate Christmas party as „ostentation” or „showing off”, or through the absence from the event. With respect to the obligations and norms applicable to the ideal employee, there were fewer signs of resistance. Most of the criticism concerned extra hours, yet people still accepted it as self-explanatory that if there is work, it needs to be done. Traditional male/female roles and having a family being equated with the ideal way of life were also considered naturally given. Singles were not, however, pushed by this pressure towards openly resisting or challenging the status quo, but towards trying to leave the outcast role behind by all means: they relied on pseudo-partners and rent-a-kids in their act as family persons.

All in all, everyone strived to identify with the image of the ideal employee, to meet the expectations associated with the role. Given that this self-image carries an internal contradiction (i.e. the tension between family and work), the corporate Christmas party also becomes the field for collective coping – apparently. In fact it provides for a **collective defense mechanism**: through the invitation of the partners, the „thank you” and the family-centered rhetoric the members of the corporate community gain collective indulgence.

VI.1.4. Christmas Hypocrisy: The System of Distorted Communication

Thus it is not an ideally functioning lifeworld free of crisis phenomena that the company and the management are faced with, but an instrumentalized lifeworld burdened by the colonizing effects of the institutions of modern capitalist society. It is these crisis **phenomena that they are seeking appropriate HR solutions for**, one of which is hosting a corporate Christmas party. The case of Engineer Christmas has shown that this aspiration **fails again and again due to the resistance of the employees**, yet it does still leave a mark. It interferes with well-proven coping strategies, that is, with people's individual interpretations and behavior patterns related to the distinction between work/private life, and creates a system of distorted communication, which manifests in large-scale, communal hypocrisy and self-deception.

Habermas (1981) distinguishes between two types of latent strategic action: conscious deception, i.e. manipulation and non-conscious deception, i.e. the system of distorted communication. The two analytic categories are difficult to apply to real situations: manipulation and self-deception rarely are clearly distinct phenomena. How should one determine whether a given individual engages in conscious manipulation or if they themselves, too, believe the false message they are transmitting?

The critical management literature usually associates manipulation with management tools. In his study criticizing corporate culturism, Willmott (1993) claims that soft control repeatedly faces legitimation issues: meaning that was created in an administrative way governed by technical rationality can create so-called **dramaturgical obedience** only, i.e. mummery, pretense and play-acting. This behavior pattern is particularly apparent in the case of Engineer Christmas. My work reveals that everyone is part of the play, everyone partakes in the common Christmas hypocrisy, and everyone becomes its victim, too. Sometimes people believe in the role they play, sometimes they expose themselves, and while this duality of wavering between „true” and „false” penetrates corporate Christmas, certain behavior norms, values and self-interpretations get reproduced in an unnoticed, non-conscious way. What is more, corporate Christmas affects the unconscious just like any other rite does, and therefore it **carries more resemblance to collective self-deception than collective manipulation**.

Willmott (1993), as well, calls attention to the risks of dramaturgical behavior, which can be phrased in Habermasian terms as follows. **Employees' behavior takes the form of latent strategic behavior, by which they contribute to the maintenance of the system**

of distorted communication, that is, to the colonization of the lifeworld, and exclude the possibility of the joint creation of a true, moral and authentic organizational lifeworld. Managers are exposed to distorted communication to an even greater extent, as their role gives them far less room for maneuver in escaping the system's interests: it is their very job to ensure that those interests are enforced. **Dramaturgical behavior, however, can only spare the individual from indoctrination as long as the distinction between the work-self and the private-self exists. It is not a coincidence that soft HR tools – among them corporate Christmas – are targeted exactly at this rather blurred line between the two.**

VI.2. Relevance of the Theoretical and Empirical Results

This chapter gives an overview of my dissertation's contribution to academic knowledge.

- According to my present knowledge, no comprehensive paper has been prepared so far on critical management studies in Hungarian. The field is among the lesser known ones in business administration circles. I cherish the hope that my dissertation will contribute to the issues and questions raised by CMS becoming a subject of academic discourse.
- The Habermasian analysis of human resource management is relevant on an international level, as well. Habermas is an author frequently cited in the international critical management literature (see Appendix 1), yet I have no knowledge of a similar analysis on HRM.
- I am confident that my empirical study built on the Habermasian theoretical framework is an important contribution to the field of organization science, with just a very few precursors, as most of the studies are of a theoretical nature (Appendix 1). The overall length of the dissertation allowed for the detailed and transparent discussion of methodological considerations (barely touched upon in the articles examined), which may serve as a baseline for future empirical research.
- Corporate Christmas and the organizational and management aspects of Christmas in general are clearly under-researched topics (Hancock and Rehn 2011). I did not manage to find any relevant Hungarian paper, and the international literature did not comprise too many works that I could build on, either. One does need to mention, nonetheless, Rippin's (2011) study on Christmas headgear, Hancock's (2013) empirical investigation of the Santa Claus

service industry, Lemmergaard and Muhr's (2011) quantitative survey on the exchange of Christmas gifts among business partners and Vachhani and Pullen's (2011) analysis of women's Christmas chores. Rosen's (1988) ethnographic study is the only piece of work that focuses on corporate Christmas; and even though it is not critical in character, it does make certain critical statements. Corporate Christmas has not, however, been empirically investigated within a Habermasian theoretical framework so far.

- From amongst the results of my research, the ones I believe to be particularly worth highlighting are the identification of the script elements and the analysis of their symbolism, and the description of the system of relationships – arranged around the three metaphors of family, gift and carnival – beyond corporate Christmas. Concerning the company as a moral community (as one of the layers of meaning of the family metaphor) and its ideological content, my findings are similar to those of Rosen. The present work, however, extends the scope with the extended family metaphor, which is then analyzed in detail from a gender perspective. The interpretation of the Christmas party as a present, which was inspired by the studies of Mauss (1954), and Lemmergaard and Muhr (2011), yielded truly original results. The studies of Rosen (1988) and Rippin (2011) are centered around the carnival-like nature of the Christmas party. The present thesis contributes to our understanding of the metaphor exactly through the lack of a carnival-like character, and points out the mingling of and interaction between the pagan and Christian roots of corporate Christmas.
- My research findings capture the unfolding of the system of distorted communication, and also the way how that drives the entire organizational community to create and maintain the colonization of the lifeworld. The dissemination of said findings might open up opportunities to contribute to the emancipatory project.

VI.3. Limitations and Future Research Avenues

Below I will review the limitations of my research and a few potential future research opportunities.

As is apparent from my findings, the research field I chose (on the difficulties of sampling see the relevant part of the methodological chapter) was a special one in the sense that the owner had a particularly dominant role, and that his and his fellow managers' values were absolutely decisive to the official messages of the corporate Christmas party and the impact it had on the organization's culture. The main vehicle of its influence was the family metaphor, which ideology, however, made even more apparent the contradiction that the continuity of traditions is impossible to maintain in a setting dominated by technical rationality: the reproduction of the lifeworld will be plagued by disruptions. The strength of the family metaphor has shown, moreover, that the carnivalesque features cannot unfold in this particular ideological framework.

From a methodological point of view, it would have been preferable to spend more time at the company, especially during the period preceding Christmas – even though dealing with the amount and diversity of material was a challenge enough regardless. I only interviewed employees who attended the Christmas party, as that was the phenomenon the world of meaning of which I intended to explore. However, in the course of the analysis I realized that with regard to the resistance to the colonization of the lifeworld, the opinion of those who consciously remained absent from the corporate Christmas party would actually have been highly relevant.

Generalizability is an eternal dilemma with qualitative studies. A qualitative case study will always face limitations in that respect, and it is obviously devoid of any possibility for generalization in the statistical sense to begin with. I am confident that the present research findings do contribute to a deeper understanding of corporate Christmas as an organizational phenomenon (naturalistic generalization), and to that of the colonization of the lifeworld by means of the instruments of soft HR (theoretical generalization).

A particularly promising future research option would be, in my view, to compare the present results with a case where the carnivalesque nature of the phenomenon is more pronounced. The circle of interviewees might be extended to include the relatives of the employees, too, to show what the corporate Christmas party means from their viewpoint. The formation of the system of distorted communication might be analyzed in more depth using the method of discourse analysis. That is, the ethnographical methods and

interviews ought to be complemented by audio recordings of dialogues, and the analysis of the relevant validity claims. These may be group interviews or dialogues between the organizers.

The research made me realize, as well, that corporate Christmas – the „gift”, the „family”, as well as the „carnival” – is something that most of the employees have a need for, notwithstanding the fact that they question its depth and seriousness at the same time. The corporate Christmas party needs to take place during private hours, during the night – just like Christmas Eve does. This is the time of day that leaves room for spirituality, mysticism and the irrational, this is when the world gets populated by spiritual beings. A further research avenue might be to capture this spirituality, to analyze in more depth the continuity (and any potential deformation) of ancient, mythical elements and Christian traditions in corporate Christmas. Nonetheless I am convinced – and will thus reveal a limitation of the theoretical framework chosen – that the Habermasian theory puts too much emphasis on rationality to be applied in such a study.

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Appendix 1: Habermasian studies in human resource management, and organizational behavior and culture

	<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Field</i>	<i>Theoretical background</i>	<i>Research purpose / Research question</i>	<i>Data collection methods</i>	<i>Data analysis methods</i>
1.	Barros 2010	Emancipatory Management: The Contradiction Between Practice and Discourse	Journal of Management Inquiry	management, organizational behavior	domination-free discourse	analysis of the practice of emancipatory management at two community organizations (two cases)	1. participant observation and document analysis 2. semi-structured interviews 3. participatory action reserach: a meeting to discuss the results of the preceding phases	1. Classification according to simple visual data displays preliminary categories, based on Miles and Huberman (1994): linking emancipatory topics to organizational practices 2. Conceptually ordered visual displays based on Miles and Huberman (1994), seeking to identify patterns 3. comparing cases: looking for common topics
2.	Lear-month 2009	'Girls' Working Together Without 'Teams': How to Avoid the Colonization of Management Language	Human Relations	human resource management	system and lifeworld	the word 'team' as the vehicle of colonization among the employees of a hospital's record-keeping department	ethnography: participant observation, research diary and interviews	no information
3.	Edwards 2009	Public Sector Trade Unionism in the UK: strategic challenges in the face of colonization	Work, Employment & Society	employment, trade unions	system and lifeworld	evaluation of attempts to reform the activities of the National Union of Teachers (UK)	interviews, questionnaire	SPSS, descriptive analysis, thematical or content analysis, coding
4.	Meisenbach 2006	Habermas's Discourse Ethics and Principle of Universalization as a Moral Framework for Organizational Communication	Management Communication Quarterly	organizational communication	validity claims	developing the steps of organizational discourse ethics, then applying it to the the Red Cross's communication following 9/11	case study – in fact, it is a retrospective study based on press material, not primary research	no information
5.	Townley, Cooper, and Oakes 2003	Performance Measures and the Rationalization of Organizations	Organization Studies	performance evaluation	Theory of Communicative Action	implementing performance evaluation at a municipal department: contradictions of rationalization	longitudinal case study, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, observation of meetings	sought for references to performance evaluation in the interviews: how respondents gave meaning to the evaluation in an iterative process identified two recurring topics

Appendix 2: Habermasian studies in management sciences

	<i>Authors</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Field</i>	<i>Theoretical background</i>	<i>Research purpose / Research question</i>	<i>Data collection methods</i>	<i>Data analysis methods</i>
1.	McLean and Wainwright 2009	Social Networks, Football Fans, Fantasy and Reality	Journal of Information, Communication & Ethics in Society	information systems	system and lifeworld	Investigation of the digital culture's effect on football fans through the analysis of official and unofficial websites	virtual ethnography (analysis of websites and forums)	discourse analysis
2.	Hassan 2008	Financial Accounting Regulations and Organizational Change: a Habermasian Perspective	Journal of Accounting & Organizational Change	accounting	system and lifeworld	the role of financial / accounting regulations in Egypt	document analysis (legislation, daily newspapers and periodicals, semi-structured interviews)	no information
3.	Samra-Fredericks 2005	Strategic Practice, 'Discourse' and the Everyday Interactional Constitution of 'Power Effects'	Organization	strategy, organizational discourse	validity claims	analysis of interactions between strategic decision makers – to exemplify	ethnography: participant observation, recording of conversations (data collected earlier)	discourse analysis: highlights two short dialogues (a few sentences) and analyzes them according to the validity claims
4.	Hancock and Tyler 2004	'MOT your life': Critical management studies and management of everyday life	Human Relations	organizational theories	system and lifeworld	the appearance of managerialist discourse in lifestyle magazines, and their impact on everyday management	1. analysis of management texts 2. analysis of lifestyle magazines 3. group interviews	1. identification of key words and topics no specific information on 2 and 3
5.	Unerman and Bennett 2004	Increased Stakeholder Dialogue and the Internet: Towards Greater Corporate Accountability or Reinforcing Capitalist Hegemony?	Accounting, Organizations & Society	corporate social responsibility	domination-free discourse, ideal speech situation	analysis of stakeholders' discourse in Shell's online forum	the conversations in Shell's online forum constitute the data (filtered)	content analysis: quantitative for the most part, supplemented with a few evaluative elements
6.	Forester 2003	Critical Ethnography and the Extra-ordinary Character of Ordinary Professional Work	Studying Management Critically (eds: Alvesson-Willmott)	strategy	validity claims	analysis of a municipality's decision making process according to validity claims	critical ethnography – highlights a 12-row dialogue	discourse analysis according to validity claims
7.	Kemmis 2001	Exploring the Relevance of Critical Theory for Action Research: Emancipatory Action Research in the Footsteps of Jürgen Habermas	Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice	education, organizational theory	system and lifeworld	tensions at the boundary between system and lifeworld in a university setting	action research	no specific information (probably by participating in respondents' conversations at the meetings)
8.	Myers and Young 1997	Hidden Agendas, Power and Managerial Assumptions in Information Systems Development: an Ethnographic Study	Information Technology & People	information systems	system and lifeworld	analysis of an information system development in New Zealand's mental health sector	critical ethnography: participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews, documents, newspapers, magazines	no information

