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EXCESSIVELY UP AT THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANISATION: NOTES ON "NOTE ON THE PROCEEDINGS TMITI/2007/10"

Ellen Hertz

Université
de Neuchâtel unine

Author

Ellen Hertz did her anthropology training in the United States and is a professor of anthropology at the *Institut d'ethnologie* of the University of Neuchâtel. Her current research focuses on the circulation of ideas, terms and models which take their source in international arenas such as the ILO or UNESCO. Courses taught include the anthropology of institutions and law, China anthropology and the study of intangible cultural heritage.

ellen.hertz@unine.ch

Summary

This paper was written for a collection of essays in honor of U.C. Berkeley professor Laura Nader, author of the famous phrase "studying up". Nader's concept of "studying up" provides us with a highly focused lens for examining the workings of power. If we turn this lens on the ordinary proceedings of a minor meeting at the International Labour Organisation in Geneva, a meeting that I had the privilege of attending as a representative of the Swiss government, one finds that power of the sort that Nader seeks to analyze is not present at the ILO. Instead, one finds a complex circulation of ideals, terms and documents that must be studied in a perspective that I have labeled "the social life of terms". This circulation does indeed involve "upness": high levels of generality that allow for certain forms of compromise and, more importantly, loftiness of principle that can then be siphoned back into national and local settings. The price for this "height", however, is a feeling of enormous distance between the grandeur of the mission of international organizations such as the ILO and the reality of their impact "on the ground". "Studying up" in the 21st century will involve following the circulation of such loftiness, and repeatedly taking the measure of its distance from problems "on the ground", without forgetting to ask whose interests are advanced when, where and why.

Key Words

Studying up
International Labour Organisation
International organizations
Labor rights
Electronics manufacturing
Anthropology of bureaucracy

Acknowledgments

Looking back at "studying up"

As phrases go, "studying up" has led an interesting life. From its inception, it seems to have been comparatively well received, if we can judge from reviews in major journals at the time (Donald 1974, Fischer 1974, Goldschmidt 1973, Kaplan 1974; see also responses by Diamond, Scholte & Wolf 1975, Hymes 1975). While the reviewers of *Reinventing Anthropology* are for the most part harsh and dismissive, Nader's chapter is singled out by some of these critics as having genuine substantive and methodological implications for transforming the discipline (see Donald 1974:861). Following its biography further, we find this phrase serving in 1980 as the basis for the creation of a research network for the study of policy analysis, occupational health and environmental degradation (*Medical Anthropology Newsletter* 1981) and for the organization of a panel at the AAA in 1995 (Gusterson 1997). Sherry Ortner's turn-of-the-century review article on the futures of anthropology identifies a generalized and widespread acceptance of the studying-up perspective in new or re-edited introductory textbooks (1999:988). Furthermore, it would seem that references to "studying up" are not mere reverential nods to past ideas; despite the fact that "studying up" is now middle-aged, it has maintained a decidedly youthful aura and still inspires young (and older) scholars to attempt adventurous forays into hostile milieus, as this volume and other recent publications attest (Schrijvers 1991, Hamann 2003, Hannerz 2006).

Taking this analysis one step further, can we assess exactly where and how "studying up" has inspired successive cohorts of scholars? Clearly the phrase has circulated: rapid analysis of the citations to which it has given rise suggests that "studying up" has an impact factor of 153, comparable to that of "experience-near" (244) or "multi-sited ethnography" (69).[2] Only about half of the uses of the term that I traced actually cite to Nader's article, a point that would merit analysis in own right. The other half seem to treat this phrase as a standard element in the social scientist's conceptual toolbox, sufficiently taken-for-granted as to have lost its author, while nonetheless sufficiently distinctive or new as to require quotation marks.[3] Of interest as well are the kinds of journals in which the phrase appears: most citations occur in general anthropology contexts, but, notably, the anthropology of education (11), law (4) and medicine (4) are present through their sub-disciplinary journals. More prominent still are references to "studying up" in the journals dedicated

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[1] Forthcoming in R. Gonsalez, R. Stryker, eds., *Studying Up, Down and Sideways: Homage to Laura Nader*.

[2] These numbers are excessively crude and intentionally so. I simply searched these three phrases on JSTOR (April 2008), and thus have not picked up on citations in books or in journals not included in that database. More importantly, these numbers do not distinguish between in-depth discussions and simple referencing. In an ideal world, no one would take much interest in quantitatively based rankings of impact, except perhaps as an *object* for analysis in a cultural-control perspective (Nader 1997), but that is another story.

[3] One article claims that perspectives on "studying 'up' or 'across' are quite common" (Moss & Matwychuk 2000:101, n. 11), citing Nader's article among a long list of "other examples"!

to social categories that could be considered "down" – women or gender studies (13) and critical race or indigenous studies (8). Finally, one finds a good number of citations in journals dedicated to sciences studies (8) and in sociology (8) where, incidentally, many sociologists seem to think the phrase originated.

If we continue our analysis still further, we might note (almost with disappointment knowing how much Nader enjoys controversy)[4], that there is virtually no *criticism* of the concept in any of the referenced materials examined. Some authors (mainly sociologists) explore the deontological and practical difficulties surrounding the study of powerful people, asking whether researchers are held to the same duties of confidentiality that our ethics codes require for the study of the less powerful (see, e.g., Galliher 1980, Wax 1980) or questioning the appropriateness of institutional review board procedures from this perspective (e.g. Sieber 1989). Others point more generally to the forms of discomfort caused by relations with people who can be categorized or who categorize themselves as more powerful than we are (Casper 1997). Still others asks whether characterizing science and technology studies (Layne 1998:12) or men's studies as "studying up" does not contribute to the very mystification of science or male dominance that STS and feminist studies have tried to undo. Finally, one author writes approvingly of "studying 'up'", putting only "up" in quotes, in a subtle but suggestive modification of the paradigm that I wish to explore further here.

Clearly, if there's a wallop in the notion of "studying up", it's the little word "up" that packs it. And yet nowhere in the critical literature on studying up is it simply asked, "what's 'up'?" Indeed, the person who has done the most to clarify where up is is Laura Nader herself, in a second (and much less cited)[5] article entitled "The Vertical Slice" (Nader 1980). As Nader points out there and has repeated in other venues (Nader 1997), the point is not to isolate an "up" to examine as if it were a self-contained unit, but to link ups to downs, to look at the *relations* between different arenas of social power, selected as a function of their differential positions with respect to two key issues: decision-making and responsibility.[6] In rereading "Up the Anthropologist", one sees clearly that through the notion of "up" (which she herself puts in quotes much of the time) Nader is identifying degrees of social and cultural *control*, from which she would like to induce corresponding degrees of social and cultural *responsibility*. As such, Nader takes her definition of

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[4] It is instructive here to go back to one of Nader's intellectual mentors, C. Wright Mills, who clearly inspired the studying-up stance, and who justified his own position in the following terms :

"much public information about [members of the American elite] is systematically misleading; and they are themselves busy and aloof and even secretive.… [I]f we are trying to understand something of the true nature of the society in which we live, we cannot allow the impossibility of rigorous proof to keep us from studying whatever we believe to be important. We must expect fumbles when, without authority or official aid, we set out to investigate something which is in part organized for the purpose of causing fumbles among those who would understand it plainly. Yet, by asserting what we can under such conditions, we may engage them and their agents in controversy, and thus learn more." (Mills 1972:363).

For an interesting discussion of the nature and origin of Mills' stance, see Gillam 1975.

[5] Using the same crude methods as before, I discovered 125 references to "vertical slice" via JSTOR, only 6 of which were related to Nader's article, the others coming from such disciplines as econometrics, political science and music theory. The ratio obtained via Google is similar: 555 entries for "Nader & studying up" and only 77 entries for "Nader & vertical slice" (April 2008).

[6] Hence her dissatisfaction with approaches that appear to take the *milieux* of the rich and powerful as self-contained cultures (Le Wita 1988; Marcus 1992), thereby reflecting the worldview of these very *milieux*, already more than inclined to insulate themselves from anything hinting at vertical slicing.

upness more or less explicitly from Mills's definition of the power elite: people, groups and institutions are "up" when their decisions affect the life conditions of many other people "below" them, and conversely, people are "down" when they not only cannot affect others' lives by their decisions, but live in conditions largely structured by others, whether they are fully aware of it or not.[7] In sum, "up" is not a place but a position, and "slicing vertically" means studying the relations between positions by asking how some people's actions asymmetrically affect other people's lives.

Honing in on "studying up"

Once clarified, this definition of upness appears terrifically simple, and I shall retain it here for its gaze-sharpening properties. Let us bear in mind, however, that it is also *too* simple, for if the social sciences had only to study the results of *decisions* in a cause-and-effect paradigm, we'd have been rolling in clover long before *that* phrase was coined. Unfortunately, as reflections in social theory have demonstrated for quite some time now, society is shaped as much by drift as by decision; more precisely, because social structures and social change are the not-so-intended outcome of the iteration of institutionalized forms of thought and action, "deciding" is an inappropriate term for what men and women who are arguably "up" can and do do under most circumstances. This is the lesson to be learned, incidentally, from a converse theoretical and methodological move associated with the *Ecole des Annales* that occupied the historical sciences during the better half of the 20th century, a move that we could sum up as an exhortation to historians to begin studying down. Fueled by many of the same forms of intellectual dissatisfaction and political engagement as those mobilizing the radical anthropologists contributing to *Reinventing Anthropology*, these historians insisted, against generations of venerable predecessors, that we could no longer study social change by simply examining the decisions of this or that great man, nor the choices in marriage and alliance between great families, nor even the creation and functioning of the great civilizational institutions (Burke 1991). Rather, the amorphous mass of smaller and apparently traceless thoughts and deeds performed by those who are "down" had to be included within the material of which history (as a process and as a discipline) was made.

Once again, Nader (1997) herself has addressed these issues in her discussions of "controlling processes" and "cultural control", but it is not clear that the implications of these different vocabularies of structuration and change have been fully thought through in the critical literature. More generally, it is safe to say that relatively little thought has been given to how "studying up" relates to other major theoretical issues in the social sciences: the structure-agency opposition

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[7] Mills begins *The Power Elite* with the following passage:

"The powers of ordinary men are circumscribed by the everyday worlds in which they live, yet even in these rounds of job, family, and neighborhood they often seem driven by forces they can neither understand nor govern. 'Great changes' are beyond their control, but affect their conduct and outlook none the less. The very framework of modern society confines them to projects not their own, but from every side, such changes now press upon the men and women of the mass society, who accordingly feel that they are without purpose in an epoch in which they are without power.

But not all men are in this sense ordinary. As the means of information and of power are centralized, some men come to occupy positions in American society from which they can look down upon, so to speak, and by their decisions mightily affect, the everyday worlds of ordinary men and women." (1972:3)

He goes on more precisely to define the group he is analyzing in the following terms:

"By the power elite, we refer to those political, economic, and military circles which as an intricate set of overlapping cliques share decisions having at least national consequences. In so far as national events are decided, the power elite are those who decide them" (1972:18).

(Giddens 1990), for example, or the tension between alienation and resistance in studies of popular culture (Grignon & Passeron 1989). "Studying up" can be performed within a number of theoretical paradigms, and it should no longer be sufficient to invoke an "up" without specifying how we believe "upness" works to structure social reproduction and change.

As Gupta and Ferguson have demonstrated with considerable force, spatialized metaphors have played a central and deceptively simple role in anthropological theorizing since its inception, reinforcing disciplinary belief in discrete territorial-cultural entities and inducing us to think in terms of Russian-doll hierarchies of local to global units (1992; see also Coleman & Collins 2006). They unpack the various components of "upness" in an article specifically addressing the question of how to conceptualize the nation-state, arguing that the language of verticality and the ranking of social spaces that it makes possible should be examined with great care:

> "Picturing the state's relation to society through the image of vertical encompassment fuses in a single, powerful image a number of analytically distinct propositions. Is the state's encompassing height a matter of superior rank in a political hierarchy? Of spatial scale? Abstraction? Generality of knowledge and interest? Distance from nature?" (2002: 983).

Clearly, vertical imagery works on a number of different semantic registers that we would do well to think through.

In this article, I would like to explore some of the subtleties of "upness" by analyzing a recent experience I had in a context that at first glance appears quite full of it. I will analyze the "Meeting" convened from April 16-18, 2007, in Geneva, Switzerland by an international organization (hereinafter "IO"), the International Labour Office (hereinafter "ILO") on the theme of working conditions in the information and technology (hereinafter "IT") industries.[8] I intend this to be both a contribution to the critical literature on studying up and a reflection on international organizations, as part of a larger (and many authored)[9] attempt to incorporate international organizations as such, and not simply the themes IOs address, into the mainstream of what are considered relevant anthropological research topics.

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[8] This sentence is intentionally awkward. I wish to underscore how terms represent the greater part of what we (and they) have to work within IOs, rendering an approach that we might label "the social life of terms" perspective virtually inescapable. The word "Meeting", for example, properly takes a capital letter here, as "Meetings" are one of the things the ILO is organized and authorized to do, which does not mean that they do not also engage in an even large number of just plain old meetings. This is an obvious point, so obvious, perhaps, that it has not occasioned the attention it deserves. If we are to understand the particular ways in which IOs are "up", great attention must be paid to the creation of acronyms, the circulation of phrases and the selective institutional hardening – "coining" is an excellent metaphor for our purposes – of terms (see Czarniawska et al. 2005).

[9] A number of anthropologists have undertaken fieldwork and document-based research more or less directly on international organizations, but no body of positions has yet emerged from these various studies. See e.g. George & Sabelli 1994, Guggenheim 2006, Li 2007 or Mosse 2008 on the World Bank; Muehlebach 2001 and Bellier 2003 on the U.N. Working Group in Indigenous Peoples; Malkki 1994, Atlani-Duault 2007 and Fresia 2010 on the UNHCR; Garsten 2008 on the UN Global Compact; Geslin & Hertz 2005 on the ILO. The group of scholars associated with the LAIOS (*Laboratoire d'anthropologie des institutions et organisations sociales*) has been particularly active in this area for more than ten years (see Abélès 1995; Bellier 1997; Mueller & Neveu 2002) and I take this opportunity to thank them for the rich workshop they organized on the anthropology of international institutions in Paris in the spring of 2008.

Studying upper: the ILO

At first glance, IOs might appear to be rather obviously higher than the nation-state, enjoying the same altitude as the largest transnational corporations or international non-governmental organizations such as WWF or Amnesty International. This first impression is reinforced in the case of the International Labour Organisation by its rather remarkable pedigree. The oldest IO, and the only one to have survived the transformation of the League of Nations into the United Nations system, it was founded in 1919 as part of the Treaty of Versailles and incorporated as the first specialized agency in the UN system in 1946.[10] Its Constitution was drafted in 1919 by a commission chaired by Samuel Gompers, head of the American Federation of Labor, and including representatives from Belgium, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, France, Italy, Japan, Poland, the U.K and the U.S.A. Its Preamble is nothing if not inspiring and, coming out of WWI, reflects the remarkable level of contemporary awareness of global economic interdependence and its consequences for world stability:

> "Whereas universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice;
> And whereas conditions of labour exist involving such injustice hardship and privation to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperiled; and an improvement of those conditions is urgently required […] ;
> Whereas also the failure of any nation to adopt humane conditions of labour is an obstacle in the way of other nations which desire to improve the conditions in their own countries;
> The High Contracting Parties, moved by sentiments of justice and humanity as well as by the desire to secure the permanent peace of the world, and with a view to attaining the objectives set forth in this Preamble, agree to the following [….]".
>
> (Constitution of the International Labour Organisation, at www.ilo.org)

From its inception, the ILO's principal activity has been to create Conventions and issue Recommendations governing labor standards.[11] Its first Conference, held in Washington in 1919, adopted six International Labour Conventions dealing with issues of working hours, unemployment, maternity protection, night work for women and children, and minimal working ages. Its mission was enlarged and specified in an Annex adopted in 1944 and referred to as the "Declaration of Philadelphia" which states as its first principle: "Labour is not a commodity".

For our purposes here, this history, best imagined in terms not of height but of depth, is important for the nostalgic aura of nobility that it lends to the ILO (and that the newer IOs will never quite match). The tone, the vocabulary, even the grammar of its founding documents exude a perfume of pastness, projecting us back into a far-away pre-post-colonial world controlled as much by London, Paris and Berlin as by New York and Washington. This history is also important as a function of the history of the charged issue of work that the ILO takes as its central concern. A rallying point for the benevolent attention of colonial powers at the beginning of the century, the provision of decent working conditions for workers at home and "natives" abroad united Western

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[10] For this and other basic information on the ILO provided in this chapter, visit its remarkable website at www.ilo.org (last consulted July 2008).
[11] For the full inventory and texts of ILO Conventions and Recommendations, see www.ilo.org/ilolex. Other areas of activity include technical cooperation, dissemination of "best practices", and research and publications in the areas of vocational training, employment policy and law, working conditions and health, social security, and labor statistics.

powers in a display of humanism framed in the evolutionary vocabulary of the "White Man's Burden".

Though the ILO was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1969 on the occasion of its 50th anniversary, the entire frame of reference for its civilizing mission was radically called into question with the onset of the Cold War and decolonization, as labor causes became even more tightly associated with Communism and with East-West struggles for influence in the Third World.[12] A more progressive but equally radical shift has been going on since the 1980s with the increased domination of neo-liberal ideology worldwide; globalization and financialization of corporate policy have a direct effect on national and local fiscal, investment and labor policy, and have undermined both the ILO's possibilities for effective action and much of its ideological legitimacy. Though the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work was adopted by the International Labour Conference (the equivalent of the legislative body of the ILO) in 1998, it provides few teeth for anything like enforcement, and the tone of ILO documents has been become increasingly subdued.

Of course, only traces of this evolution are in evidence in the very general statement of the ILO's four strategic objectives, available for consultation on the website:
"- Promote and realize standards and fundamental principles and rights at work;
- Create greater opportunities for women and men to secure decent employment and income;
- Enhance the coverage and effectiveness of social protection for all;
- Strengthen tripartism and social dialogue."

This last objective points to another unique characteristic of the ILO within the UN system. The concept of "tripartism", enshrined in ILO founding documents, designates a substantive and procedural commitment to the idea that genuine progress in the area of work and social justice will not occur unless workers' representatives are present, along with employers' representatives and governments, in the negotiation of the relevant instruments. It also represents the commitment to encouraging what the ILO calls "social dialogue" within member States by promoting the fundamental rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining. Indeed, ILO tripartism reflects a level of sophistication in the operationalization of its mission and principles that anthropologists should thoroughly admire. The only IO structurally to recognize that the relation between governments and the citizens they are supposed to represent is complex, mediated and problematic, it folds other large organizations (national and international trade unions and employer' associations) into its very procedures. Thus, to the height and depth of the ILO's missions and history must be added the breadth of its design, an inclusiveness that it actively promotes as one of its greatest strengths.

Going back to the various attributes of upness listed by Ferguson and Gupta above – superior rank in a political hierarchy, spatial scale, abstraction, generality of knowledge and interest; distance from nature – we should note that, at first glance, the ILO seems to possess just about all of them.

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[12] A fascinating side-effect of this change in frame was the treatment accorded to the category "indigenous", which shifted almost imperceptibly from designating *all* colonized populations, the "natives" in the colonial vocabulary, to those populations colonized over the course of the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries and whose social organization could be qualified as "primitive". This shift is examined in Rodriguez-Piñero 2003; see also Geslin & Hertz 2005.

International law ranks *higher* than national and local law in a courtroom.[13] In terms of spatial scale, ILO activities *covered* the globe when the word "globalization" was just a glint in the power elite's randy eyes. The ILO research team commands access to the most thorough and standardized forms of data on working conditions and labor policy that exist, allowing for comparison and generalization at a *high level* of abstraction. Not beholden to any national territory, the ILO is disengaged from the grimy material conditions of subsistence and governance *on the ground*. And last but not least, the ILO mission is quite simply *lofty*, seeking to *elevate* humanity from its *baser* instincts and *lowly* conditions.

And there are other, more material ways in which the ILO is up. Set in a sparkling white building exuding orderly modernist utopianism, on a majestic hill leading away from the Lake of Geneva to where the rents are high, it offers a splendid view of the Mont Blanc from its terrace. Enormous conference rooms and large rectilinear corridors are decorated with over-sized wall hangings, sculptures, vases and other artifacts, given to the ILO as gifts from member States. With a budget of almost US $600 million (2008-09), 181 member states, 1900 employees and 600 international experts spread between the Geneva headquarters and the regional offices, it is not a large organization by some standards, but neither is it particularly lowly. And most importantly from my point of view – that of a concerned anthropologist-lawyer worried about the complex organization of social justice on a global scale – the ILO holds out the promise of precisely the kinds of height that Nader has singled out in "Up the Anthropologist": a place where the decisions of a few affect the life conditions of many. Indeed, this is what drew me to the ILO; let us now see what I found there.

Getting inside "up"
Despite this aura of elevation, there are many signs that the ILO may not be quite as unequivocally up as it (or I) would wish. The first of these is undoubtedly the very fact that I was there. This not as an exercise in false modesty; rather, my presence there, and that of many of my colleagues to this occasion, tells us something about exactly where we had been parachuted, and the kinds of expertise and representation that were needed to carry out our functions as this level. To clarify this, we need to delve briefly into the many-tiered structure of the ILO and examine how it interacts with its permanent administration, the International Labour Office in Geneva.

The "Meeting" had been convened by "SECTOR", that is to say the "Sectoral Activities Programme", one of the four programs (along with "ACT/EMP", "DIALOGUE" and "ACTRAV") of the Social Dialogue Sector ("DIALOGUE"), which is, somewhat confusingly, one of the four substantive departments or sectors of the ILO (along with "STANDARDS", "EMPLOYMENT" and "PROTECTION"). The Sectoral Activities Programme is something of an oddity in the ILO system in that it structures its work around specific issues in industry sectors (as its name suggests) and not around the ILO's four strategic objectives (see p. 6 above); it thus has what it calls an "integrating agenda" that is unique in the ILO framework. At the bequest of the ILO Governing Body (the ILO's "executive" arm), the Sectoral Activities Programme conducts research, convenes "meetings" and initiates "action programmes", "standard-related activities" and "cross-sectoral activities", all of which take place on a tripartite basis with representatives of governments,

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[13] We will return to this very problematic assertion below; for our purposes here, let us simply retain that it is not entirely false.

workers' groups and employers' groups invited to participate, usually in equal numbers. It is important to note that these meetings and activities are not primarily intended to lead to the formulation of international norms. Conventions and Recommendations – instruments of general or universal applicability with potential binding legal force in international law – are the prerogative of the International Labour Conference, the equivalent of the legislative arm of the ILO. Rather the agreements arrived at through this sector tend to involve multiple actors, not merely states signatories, and are articulated at a lower level of generality, as, for example the "Guidelines on Port State Responsibilities for the Inspection of Labour Conditions on Board Ships" to be examined in a Meeting scheduled for the fall of 2008. The Sectoral Activities Programme works on the assumption that through research, reporting and social dialogue concerning "best practices", employers, workers and governments can be brought together to compare experiences, learn from each others' positions and forward the ILO's "Decent Work" agenda in specific areas.

The particular meeting that concerns us here fell under the "mechanical and electrical engineering" sector, which is where computer hardware production is traditionally placed.[14] All participants received a 100-some page report entitled "The production of electronic components for the IT industries: Changing labour force requirements in a global economy" (ILO 2007a), researched and written by the Office staff at the request of the Governing Body. This report provided participants with an industry overview, looking at global employment trends, subcontracting practices, county and local strategies, training needs, emerging issues for working conditions, and labor and industry responses to these new issues. It was the first ILO report of its kind for the computer manufacturing industry, and as such had attracted a certain amount of attention from the press. This was intensified by the campaign that a network of international and national NGOs had launched during the months preceding the Meeting to sensitize consumers to the issue of decent work in the computer industry.[15]

This background is important for it allows us to take the measure of the degree and kinds of expertise that had been convened to reflect on these important and sensitive issues, issues touching the lives of an estimated 18 million workers worldwide (ILO 2007a:6). My own presence was a case in point. Following normal procedure, the ILO has invited Switzerland to send a maximum of two government representatives to the Meeting if it so desired; seeing that issues of sex discrimination are central to this industry, the Swiss Federal Bureau for Equality had been consulted, and through a friend, I had been thought of for this limited (three day) mandate. Technically speaking, I was thus appointed as an "advisor" to the Swiss government, along with the official Swiss representative, a bureaucrat from the Swiss Federal Office for Communication who admitted to me that he knew virtually nothing about the issues at hand and was not sure what he was doing there. Though I myself am in no sense an expert on working conditions in the computer manufacturing industry in Asia, I am a China anthropologist and I happen also to be a lawyer and a feminist active in the area of gender studies. By chance, I had, in addition, a general understanding of the workings of the ILO through previous research on Conventions n° 107 and 169 concerning indigenous peoples. It should be noted, however, that I am in no way an expert in

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[14] See specifically http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/sector/techmeet/tmiti07/index.htm
[15] See http://goodelectronics.org, the website for a well known international coalition of NGOs active in this area. Its steering committee is composed of CAFOD (UK), CEREAL (Mexico), Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility ICCR (USA), the International Metal Workers Federation IMF (Switzerland), SACOM (Hong Kong), Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition SVTC (USA), SOMO (The Netherlands) and TIE ASIA (Malaysia).

the anthropology of work, nor in national and international labor law (though I would like to be), and I know even less about the computer manufacturing industry; furthermore, I had never participated in a "Meeting" before.

If I go into this gory detail it is because, to my great surprise, I found that many of the government representatives to the Meeting were even less prepared than was Switzerland to carry out their job. Weber (1921) has demonstrated that the growth of bureaucracy and the forms of legal authority with which it is associated require the presence of experts, highly trained in the very specialized areas of knowledge that make modernity possible. Clearly, this form of expertise was not required of governments at this stage, which also suggests that the situation was not entirely bureaucratic in the weberian sense. The vast majority of states had simply opted out altogether: only 19 governments were represented in total, and of these only a handful of representatives knew the issues and had taken the time to prepare a position – Japan, the Philippines and Indonesia come to mind. Five of the six largest players in the industry – China (with 35% of total employment in the sector), the United States (7%), Russia (5%), Germany (4%) and Korea (4%) (ILO 2007a:7) – honored the Meeting through their absence. Other governments were nominally present but their representatives disappeared after the opening session, materializing again briefly for the wrap-up. Still others seemed to view the meeting as something of a trade fair, during which their job was to attract direct investment from international firms. The countries that participated the most actively in the debates (Egypt, Spain, Switzerland, for example) had virtually no stakes in this industry and did so on principled grounds, seemingly following the political commitments of their representatives more than any official line on the subject.

Clearly (and fortunately), governments did not represent the driving force behind the Meeting. Rather, the impetus had come from the Governing Body, no doubt reflecting the concerns and expertise of the permanent staff of the International Labour Office. This apparently poor performance can be explained, then, by the nature of the Sectoral Activities Programmes itself. As mentioned, SECTOR is a part of DIALOGUE, whose main objective consists in getting employer and labor representatives together to discuss specific aspects of the industry, and ideally to come to voluntary agreements or accords on particular problems. The absenteeism of governments also signaled how distant this Meeting was from the "higher" functions of the ILO, those that take place within the Governing Body or the International Labour Conference during its annual meetings in Geneva. As no decisions of a binding nature were to be taken here, many governments seemed willing simply let the ILO staff do the grunt work, knowing that they would have ample opportunity to participate if activities in this area "rose" to the level of the executive or legislative fora of the ILO.

More encouraging was the level of participation and expertise represented by labor and employers' representatives. Workers were represented by 10 associations or labor unions, including the Hungarian Metalworkers' Federation, the Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers' Union, the Japanese Electrical, Electronic and Information Union and the Alliance at IBM. In addition, members of the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF) and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) had been invited in their capacity as representatives of non-governmental international organizations, for a total of 16 people. These worker representatives appeared relatively well informed about the general issues at hand and unified in their purpose. Their principal objective seemed to be to put pressure on employer representatives to include unions and workers' associations more systematically in their norm- and decision-making procedures, and

to guarantee that any text that would result from this Meeting included provisions for including organized labor in discussions to come.

As it must be in a tripartite situation, employers were also represented by 10 members who had been officially invited by the Governing Board, including representatives of the Jamaica Employers' federation, the Belgium Enterprise Federation, the *Union des industries et métiers de la métallurgie* (France), the *Camara Nacional de la Industria Electronica, Telecommunicaciones e Informatica* (Mexico), Hewlett Packard, the Canadian Employers Council, the Employers' Federation of India and Philips Electrical Industries of Pakistan, for a total of 11 people (with 1 technical advisor). In addition, 20 other professionals were present as invited members of "other official international organizations", in this case, the International Organisation of Employers. These representatives appeared for the most part to be thoroughly informed and prepared, and had a common agenda that, if not negotiated before hand, fell into place over the course of the three days. This agenda consisted in assuring that the language of any text that was to come of this Meeting put their efforts to guarantee good working conditions in the industry in the best possible light while highlighting the difficulties specific to this sector (high levels of competition; complicated sub-contracting schemas that make control over labor conditions in the supply chain difficult; high levels of innovation requiring constant re-training and complex decisions about relocation, etc.).

Finally, the Governing Board had invited or allowed the presence of other "official international organizations" – here, the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) – and of "unofficial" non-governmental organizations, who enjoyed the rights to participate in the discussions and even distribute materials, but not the right to vote. In our case, the network of NGOs associated with GoodElectronics were represented by one person officially, and quite a few more unofficially. Of all of the "stakeholders" present at the Meeting, these were no doubt the best informed. As we shall see, their presence and role in the process of "social dialogue" represented an interesting source of tension for the other social partners.

Other elements also played a part in defining the particular atmosphere of the Meeting. First, it should be noted that the element of secrecy alluded to in Mills' definition of the power elite was entirely absent here; all documents were readily available on the web, depriving participants of the feeling that they were in any way a chosen few. This sentiment was reinforced by the rows of empty chairs already alluded to, the aura of desolation they caused intensified by behavior that seemed to strike everyone but me and my Swiss colleague as normal. All sessions started late, sometime almost an hour late, with people entering and leaving the room for reasons unknown. Furthermore, this apparently casual functioning was contradicted by the highly formalized nature of some of the procedures, lending a perfume of high bureaucracy to much of the three-day encounter, as if going through the motions was not a fallback position but an art actively to be cultivated.

On the one hand, we were confronted with written and unwritten standard procedure determining who spoke when and at what degree of generality. A certain number of secretary generals, acting executive directors, deputy secretary generals, executive secretaries, experts, chairpersons and vice-chairpersons respectively welcomed, thanked, were questioned and were elected, in a series of oral interventions lacking anything like verve. On the other hand, certain moments of the proceedings were refreshingly informal, and included sharp criticism of the report that we had all received, sharp exchanges between the employers' and the workers' representatives, implicit threats to leave the Meeting without producing a final text, demands to modify procedures in

various ways, and time-outs called by both employers' and workers' representatives in order to negotiate common positions on language and phrasing. To top things off, this mixture of formal and informal was rendered more poignant by the awkwardness of intercultural communication, miscommunication and disagreement – all of this intensified by the expert but laborious activities of patient interpreters sitting in booths located somewhere behind wherever one could possibly be.

Yet, despite this rather ill-assorted collection of individuals, despite the excessive formalism of certain moments and the frankly amateurish quality of others, despite my creeping realization that the problems of 18 millions workers were not going to meet with tangible solutions as a result of these three days, something happened at the Tripartite Meeting on the Production of Electronic Components for the IT Industries held in Geneva from 16 to 18 April 2007.

The day I was Switzerland
The goal of the Meeting was to adopt a document describing what had been accomplished during the Meeting. This statement is not intended to be facetious and merits elaboration. It is barely an exaggeration to say that the sole "product" of IOs such as the ILO is documents. These documents come in a wide variety of forms and enshrine many contents, but they remain documents. The extent to which this fact may strike us as disconcerting or disappointing is a measure of the hopes we hold for a direct relationship between "high" and "low", between decisions "at the summit" and conditions "on the ground", a point to which I shall return in my conclusion. For now, suffice it to say that what happened in Geneva over this three day period in April was that a collection of 60-80 people, with highly variable degrees of presence, competence and effort, produced the papers necessary for the International Labour Office staff to produce the "Note on the proceedings TMITI/2007/10" (ILO 2007b).

This accomplishment is more remarkable than it might seem at first glance, for the threat that the Meeting might adjourn without the desired papers was quite real. As it became clear during the plenary discussions scheduled over the first two days, significant differences in tone and emphasis separated workers' and employers' positions. In general, the DIALOGUE sector strives to produce documents that are accepted by consensus. Though the Standing Orders allow for vote by simply majority, this was clearly not a desired outcome in a Meeting designed to promote further discussions, inside and outside the ILO context, between workers' and employers' associations in the high-visibility ITC sector. Time was an important source of pressure as well, as it was impossible to prolong a Meeting beyond its scheduled timeslot. In sum, nothing guaranteed the success of this enterprise in advance, and the precise ways in which it came about deserve our scholarly attention.

The Meeting began at 9:00 with group meetings to which my Swiss colleague and I were the only ones to arrive on time, a bad habit that we were to repeat on consecutive occasions, with serious consequences. At 11:30 or thereabouts, workers' and employers' representatives joined governments for the official "Opening Session", during which we heard statements by the Chairperson and by the acting Executive Director of the Social Dialogue Sector, intended to clarify the formal aspects and set a tone of measured optimism for the Meeting. In the afternoon, we reconvened for the first substantive plenary session, organized around a discussion of the Office Report and specifically of the three broad questions the Report had highlighted: the role of social dialogue in the IT industries; the adherence to recognized labor standards throughout the supply chain; and best practices in the area of lifelong learning. In all, three plenary sessions of at least two hours were devoted to substantive tripartite exchanges of views. It was during these

exchanges that the major fault lines of the discussion became clear, as did the risk that no common statement could be agreed upon.

After initial statements thanking the ILO for its role in organizing the Meeting and asserting the importance of social issues in this highly dynamic and competitive industry, the three group spokespeople began staking out their respective positions. The first bone of contention centered on the ILO's definition of "social dialogue". For employers' representatives, this notion had to be broadened to include all relevant "stakeholders", including, notably, sub-contractors, customers, shareholders and NGOs. Furthermore, they insisted that "employers did not see social dialogue as the solution to all problems"; some decisions had to be made by management alone (ILO 2007b:10). For the workers' representatives, this position was "solely aimed at diluting the role of trade unions in the process" (*op cit.,* 11) and was not acceptable. The absence of worker representatives in the drafting of industry-wide codes of conduct such as the EICC and GeSI initiatives[16] was cited to illustrate this attitude, and Martin Luther King's riotous voices of the unheard invoked to illustrate the risks attendant with ignoring organized labor. Furthermore in labor's view, while NGOs were all well and good, nothing could replace the historical role of trade unions to insure vigilance in asserting labor rights and guaranteeing standards on the floor. This viewpoint was reinforced by the government of Spain and others who underlined the fact that in the ILO context, social dialogue referred to interactions between employers' and workers' organizations. When on the next day, the employer spokesperson complained that they "had decided to attend this meeting expecting social dialogue, but found themselves engaged in debate" (*op cit.,* 16), the Secretary-General of the Meeting intervened to "clarify" that "the Meeting and the ongoing debate *were representative* of social dialogue" within the ILO framework (*op cit.,* 17, my emphasis). This dialogue on "dialogue" did not bode well for subsequent discussions.

The second bone of contention centered on the role that brand-name manufacturers could and should play in assuring that their contract manufacturers or subcontractors respected international labor standards. As a general rule, both sides to the debate agreed that this was a problem, but disagreed on whether or not the large brand-name companies were making good-faith efforts to tackle it. The spokesperson for the workers encouraged employers to adhere to the same standards of transparency in the supply chain that were currently in practice in the textile industry, and insisted once again that adherence to recognized standards could only be achieved by actively involving trade unions. The spokesperson for employers' groups argued that there were strategic business risks to supply-chain transparency, and that the ITC industry was different from other industries in this respect. She reiterated the position that voluntary initiatives set high standards, often higher than those of the ILO, and encouraged the ILO to play a more active role in enforcing those standards that did exist. Though they did not seem to notice it at the time, both sides agreed, however, that termination should be a last resort when violations of labor standards were discovered with subcontractors, the principal efforts being directed to educating contractors manufacturers as to "the business case" for respecting labor standards. Brand-name companies

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[16] The EICC initiative (Electronic Industry Code of Conduct) brings together 36 brand-name manufacturers committed to adopt common standards in the areas of labor, health and safety, the environment, management systems and ethics (see http://www.eicc.info/). GeSI (the Global e-Sustainability Initiative) is currently composed of 23 brand-name companies in the ITC sector working to promote sustainable development through activities in the areas of supply chains, climate change, accountability, e-waste, materiality and sustainability (see http://www.gesi.org).

had also to work towards reducing the time pressures under which their contract manufacturers operated.

The final question for discussion – best practices in the area of lifelong learning – elicited less disagreement, mainly because government representatives did not actively pay a part in this discussion. The discussion centered on the proper balance between government, employer and worker investment in continuing education, with employers' taking a guardedly engaged stance and workers a more aggressive one. Overall all participants to the Meeting agreed that continued re-training, and concentration on competences rather than specific skills were proper policies for avoiding retrenchment and structural unemployment in this fast-changing and highly demanding sector.

This, then, was the discussion that was to provide the basis for the "Conclusions" of the Meeting, to be adopted, it was hoped, on the afternoon of the third and last day. To draft these conclusions, a "Working Group on Conclusions" was formed, composed of 5 representatives from each party to the tripartite discussion. Arriving on time once again to the meeting at which these representatives were to be chosen, my Swiss colleague and I found ourselves elected. As a starting point for this task, we were provided with a first draft concocted by the staff members of the Office and we set to the unlikely task of forging a common statement out of a fair amount of mistrust and disagreement, a task that was to occupy us for the next full day.

It is important to note that the language being negotiated here was anything but technical in the strict sense of the word. The document to be produced was to have no binding effect on anyone whatsoever; its destiny was to be included in the "Note on the proceeding" and thus make its way into the Sectoral Activities Programme's annual report to be submitted to the Governing Body. This might be also the place to add that producing a potentially binding document involves a procedure that can easily take up to 10 years, and that turning this into an actually binding document requires ratification by member states through their national parliaments. To put this process further in perspective, it should be added that while most governments (with the notable exception of the United States) have ratified all of the 8 Conventions that the ILO considers "fundamental", the vast majority of the ILO's 188 Conventions has not been ratified by the vast majority of states.[17] The stakes involved in determining the language of the paper we were to produce that day were thus comparatively low. And yet stakes there were.

However, as it became evident over the course of the Working Group session, the stumbling blocks lay elsewhere than one might have thought after participating in the plenary discussions. Rather than grand principles opposing labor and capital, what we faced were highly context-dependent tussles over specific terms, conducted in a climate of both remarkable stubbornness and sudden displays of good will on both sides. Both social partners seemed to be aiming not so much to "win" as to guarantee what they viewed as a balanced picture, a picture in which large brand-name ITC companies appeared as sincerely engaged in the pursuit of higher labor standards in the industry, while the role of trade unions as guarantors for labor justice was

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[17] For example, the United States has ratified a grand total of 14 Conventions. By way of comparison, China has ratified 22, Switzerland 47, Norway 90 and France 102. Note that a non-ratified convention is not considered to be law in the country that did not ratify it.

simultaneously reaffirmed and strengthened. Semantic arm-wrestling occurred around what could seem to be negligible nuances, employer representatives insisting, for example, that the word "negative" be systematically replaced by the word "challenging", or worker representatives insisting that the official ILO definition of "workers' representatives" be included in a footnote. Both side seemed also to put stock in general opening statements of resounding tone but little applicability.

In short, the work of the Working Group consisted in working through a long series of seemingly minor (and yet always threatening) disagreements, negotiated between two groups who basically did not trust each other and yet displayed a genuine interest in moving forward, as if the threat of failure were no such document to be produced temporarily overrode more substantive commitments on both sides. Governments played a key mediating role here, frequently proposing alternative language and weighing in occasionally on one side or another. To my delight and astonishment, the specific forms of expertise required for this particular phase of the operation were a good command of the English language and tact, two things of which I have a fair amount, making me a key player at this stage of the procedure. Furthermore, my role was considered all the more natural as a palpable mystic surrounds Switzerland's political neutrality and long history of negotiating diplomatic solutions – a mystic all the more powerful given that I am originally from the U.S. Nonetheless, it was this combination of skills and myth that apparently compelled the Working Group Chairperson frequently to turn to me and ask, "Would Switzerland like to propose alternative language?"

To everyone's obvious relief, the result of this exercise, which lasted for 10 hours straight, was a paper that could be then duly adopted in the closing plenary session at 17:00. Many people were thanked, including "Switzerland", and we all went home, never to see each other again. After the Meeting, the Office staff contacted us all once by email, requesting our approval for their transcriptions of any oral statements we might have made that were to be reprinted in the draft "Note", and a few months later we received the final version through the mail. When preparing to write this paper, I searched the web to learned the fate of "my" Note, and discovered that it had indeed been used to compile the yearly "Report of the Committee on Sectoral and Technical Meetings and Related Issues" (ILO 2007c), submitted to the Governing Body in November of 2007 as an attachment to item number 16 of an agenda which comprised a total of 22 items (not counting committee work) to be treated over a 15 day period. Reference to my Note appeared on pages 8-9 of document GB 300/16 (a document of 14-odd pages), and one can conclude from reading the 5 paragraphs thereon that it elicited little controversy. One employers' representative observed with satisfaction that "real employers" had participated in record numbers, and it was decided, earth-shakingly, that the Committee would recommend that the Governing Body authorize the Director-General to communicate the Note to governments, to international employers' and workers' organizations, and to relevant IOs. The Committee further requested "that the Director-General bear in mind, when drawing up proposals for the future work of the Office, the wishes expressed by the Meeting in the conclusions." (ILO 2007c:9).

Instrumentalizing upness
This, then, was the message in the bottle tossed into the sea of a potentially juster world. Put starkly, using Nader's definition of upness there was clearly nothing up whatsoever at this Meeting, nor even perhaps at the ILO. Put more politely, we could say that the ILO is *excessively* up, located "above" the real workings of power and responsibility that interest Nader. In fact, the naderian notion of upness is ill fitted to describe what happened at this Meeting in a number of ways that bear examination.

As my rather long description is intended to demonstrate, there was nothing that could be identified as a decision in this process, a moment when an individual or group of individuals chose to set the course of events in one direction or another. Rather, the drawn out procedures, the multiples tiers, the tripartite structure, the consensual nature of ILO activities all make ILO acts look more like the result of institutional momentum than of any identifiable form of agency. Furthermore, though Nader's (and C. Wright Mills') intention is to encourage social scientists to examine the *threats* to social justice posed by concentrations of power in modern society, it is easy to find oneself wishing that the ILO were equipped with *more* power and influence, including the force necessary to put its "decisions" into practice. It is no secret that the international arena is not equipped with this type of force, that international law is only "higher" than national law when national law decides to let it be, but it is nonetheless somewhat troubling to take the full measure of the distance between what goes on in the ILO and the conditions under which 18 million employees in the computer manufacturing industry work.

If the ILO is not up, if the efforts of all of us over the three days spent in Geneva were so utterly purposeless, why did we come and why would anyone come back? Discounting for the fact that many will not come back and still more did not come, it is nonetheless the case that Meetings such as this take place, that documents are produced, and that there are stakes, energy, intelligence and even emotions attached to this production. Clearly, not only the ILO in general but even the Meeting I attended partook of some of the attributes of height teased out by Gupta and Ferguson – not "superior rank in a political hierarchy" but certainly a level of "generality of knowledge and interest" that lent the whole affair its potentially lofty pretensions. Indeed, it was precisely these lofty generalities that brought the social partners to the negotiating table and kept them there, employers' representatives in order to benefit from the moral authority of this forum in their pursuit of corporate responsibility objectives, workers' representatives in order to enshrine in ever more documents the importance of workers' rights and of their role in protecting them. In very concrete ways as well, it was the levels of generality of the language that we hammered out together in the Working Group that allowed the process to move forward, as conflicts over terms were often resolved by simply shifting to a higher level of abstraction (or vagueness).

In short, "upness" at the ILO is not so much an attribute of the organization as a semantic resource that it and its members can call upon to advance their agendas and defend their causes. (They don't call it the "moral *high* ground" for nothing!) This resource is mobilized through the issuing and circulation of documents that can then be presented in other international, national and local arenas: other IOs, the media, boardrooms, national parliaments, and local locales. The point here is not to measure the degrees of good-faith or cynicism that govern the circulation and use of these kinds of documents but to notice that both good-faith and cynicism feed on the belief that the ILO is in some senses very much "up". Perceiving upness at the ILO is not a simple analytic error; rather this aura of height is nourished by the ILO and by its constituencies in order to accomplish the particular things that the ILO is designed to do. In sum, upness is a native category.

In the case of the Meeting I attended, this argument can be taken one step further, for not only was upness at stake but the naderian notion of the vertical slice was at the heart of one of its principal debates: can the big brand names be held accountable for the labor standards practiced by their subcontractors. At issue here were opposing views of the degree and kind of control that brand-name manufacturers could exercise over their subcontractors. Predictably, workers' representatives argued that brand-name companies were not sufficiently serious about exercising

their influence over sub-contractors and that they refused to acknowledge the ways in which they were part of the cause for these violations (through just-in-time contractual arrangements) and/or benefited from them (through the lower labor costs they made possible). Employers' representatives, on the other hand, pointed to all of the factors that limited their power to determine conditions on the ground: lack of commitment by national governments, particularly China, in the application of international labor standards; poor education of sub-contractors, who had not been taught to see "the business case" for investing in better working conditions; the extremely competitive and dynamic nature of the industry; and finally, their own excessive upness, that is, the multiple layers of sub-contractors that kept them from knowing what was really going on on the shop floor.

For our purposes, what is important to note is that the key questions of control and responsibility that Nader raises in "Up the Anthropologist" are not simply questions that "we" ask about "them", the social actors we might be studying. Rather, verticality is a stake in an enormously important political debate about who's in charge in a globalizing world. Questions of traceability are central issues for actors and analysts alike as the length of command chains and the complexity of the networks that define globalization inevitably dilute both the power to determine the direction of change and the kinds of responsibility one can hold people to as a consequence.

Conclusions
On the basis of my participation in a three-day Meeting at the ILO, I have argued that the aura of height that we associate with international organizations, their institutionalized ethereality, deserves to be taken seriously but not at face value. Clearly, more is needed if we are fully to understand the *raison d'être* of Meetings such as this, and to trace their influence, direct and indirect, on social justice in work over five, ten, twenty, fifty years to come. The geography and temporality of such studies must mirror that of the ILO itself, with periodic short visits to other meetings, during which collective energy is mobilized around still more documents. Practitioners of the anthropology of IOs must follow the paper trail wherever it leads, into the bowels of many other organizations (national and international federations of workers, of employers, other IOs, corporate boardrooms and forums, state administrations), thoroughly documenting the diverse processes of digestion and regurgitation at work. Ideally, also, these studies would be of some interest to the IOs we were analyzing, creating a scholarly dialogue between international administrations and anthropologists. This is the work to be done if we are to transpose into the 21st century the crucial questions of power and responsibility raised by Laura Nader in her 1969 article.

17

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