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An American at IRIS

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My congratulations to the editorial collective for the inauguration of the debate forum in SJIS 6(1). I heard the Bansler/Kraft paper when it was first delivered in Cambridge and watched the reaction of the Scandinavian researchers present. Barbara Andrews and I recently completed a research project on the cultural construction of computing in the Nordic countries. While we were much impressed with the sophisticated and progressive work of many systems developers, we noticed a dearth of the kinds of development projects so conspicuous in the debate. Consequently, I am both aware of the deep emotions and concerns stirred by this debate and I see a link between the debate and the relative absence of projects. The debate is important because, like the workshop on "Infurgy" at the IRIS 17 in Finland, it addresses a basic question: What is the proper objective of system development practice, as an intellectual activity, as political practice in the broadest sense, and as a profession in employment based social formations? In my brief intervention, I wish to raise some points which I feel will make the future debate more productive. Despite the problems of their rhetorical style (about which more below), Bansler's and Kraft's comments better communicate the senses of unease which Barbara Andrews and I experienced within the Nordic system development community than does Kyng. Thus I respond primarily to their response to Kyng. First, I think the debate needs to be explicitly broadened beyond the CRA (collective resource approach), perhaps to that admittedly ambiguous but still serviceable notion of "the Scandinavian approach to system development." It seems to me that there is a parallel be-

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tween the situation of those in this community and that of feminists in Nordic science and technology. During the 1980s, feminists both critiqued technoscience as profoundly gendered and argued for more women to include themselves and be included in technoscience. These two goals appear in the 1990s to be more difficult to pursue at the same time. In 1980s Nordic system development, I see a similar dual set of goals—a political agenda of social transformation along with a professional agenda to legitimate system development. Again, in the 1990s, the difficulties of pursuing both these goals, not only at the same time but also in the same activity, are more evident. CRA was one particular way of conceptualizing the relationship between political and professional goals, but there were others. To focus only on CRA is to not be sufficiently sensitive to these others, as well as differences in national context. Kraft and Bansler are to be commended for recognizing the importance of national context, but what they say seems to me to be more applicable to the Swedish than to the Norwegian context, for example. Secondly, I want the debate to be more empirical in a "sociology of work" manner, to approach system development as a labor process with its own relative autonomy. Bansler and Kraft attribute the failure of CRA to accomplish its goals to the centralized structure of industrial relations in the Nordic countries, and their pessimism with regard to the Scandinavian approach in the US follows from the thorough domination of the labor process by capital. Both of these are important structural features of the situations within which systems developers work, but they are not the whole story. In contemporary Sweden, it would appear that industrial relations are no longer centralized. In both the Nordic countries and in the US, the labor process is subject to several, often conflicting, structural forces, and it has its own relative autonomy. When one examines the actual practice of systems developers, one sees this autonomy. Several argued to Barbara and me that user participation was best understood as a necessary prerequisite to creating good systems, for example, while at the same time arguing that it was necessary to "deconstruct" the user. An ethnographic focus on actual practice leads to accounts which are not only sensitive to these complexities but can also better illuminate both the changes to which Kyng refers and the opportunities referred to by Greenbaum and Kyng. And this of course leads to the issue of rhetoric and tone. Their view of the domination of the labor process in the US lead Bansler and Kraft to frequent verbal overkill; e.g., "Users will remain objects of the design process, not active participants, except in the most formal way" (p.103). Yet members of the Committee on Computing as a Cultural Process in the American Anthropological Association have reported numerous cases of real, substantive user participation in actual cases in the US. How can this be? It is the polemical style which makes such cases appear to be unusual rather than part of the varied empirical reality which one would expect in a generally overdetermined world. In sum, I think there is a real crisis in "the Scandinavian approach" as a cultural performance, and Bansler and Kraft are correct to point out the dangers when this performance is marketed in a different political economy. At the same time, the experience of

systems developers in the Nordic countries continues to be relevant to those committed to a more human future. By broadening the practices to be examined to include more than the CRA, by being more ethnographically empirical, and by choosing rhetorics which encourage more nuanced discussion, this important debate over the Scandinavian approach may move our understanding forward more quickly.

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