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Nordic Lights – Work, Management and Welfare in Scandinavia

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The distinctive features of the Scandinavian “social model” and « industrial democracy » have been admired, envied or criticized the world over because of their « human face », which reconciled innovation, competitiveness and performance in manufacturing and services with smooth industrial and organisational transitions in the labour market and at the workplace, thanks to a collaborative (or, rather corporative) labour relations system, characterized by high membership in trade unions and employers’ organisation, social dialogue and extensive collective bargaining, underpinned by government-supported and widespread access to education, vocational and continued training, health services and welfare systems.

This model has come under strain over the past two decades in the wake of severe economic downturns in the mid-1990s, the technology bubble, the rapid spread of globalization and deregulation, the spread of foreign ownership and private management styles in both the private and public sectors, and the recent global financial and economic crisis. The social-democratic governments of earlier decades were replaced by conservative coalitions, while parts of the public sector were privatized, notably in education and elderly care, while « new public management » approaches were introduced in the public services. In the private sector, business process reengineering and lean production methods have changed the management approaches to the quality of work environment and to labour-management relations, provoking workers’ and unions’ resistance. The social fabric started being eroded by attacks on union rights, employer-promoted individualisation of pay that encouraged a shift among workers towards short-term

interests and a greater focus on materialistic expectations from union membership. As large industrial companies declined, were restructured or changed ownership, jobs shifted to smaller service companies, adversely affecting wage levels, job quality, employment security and union influence.

While the welfare state is still strong in Sweden, the conservative government coalitions introduced drastic tax cuts, slashed sickness and unemployment benefits, liberalized restrictions on precarious and short-term jobs, closed the National Institute for Working Life (NIWL) –the harbinger of research and dissemination on improvements in work organisation and environment–, reduced the budget of the Work Environment Authority and lowered allowances for education, notably for training for trade union representatives. The author note that, while these austerity measures may have been necessary to improve incentives to work, their massive character increased inequalities and weakened trade unions to an extent that might endanger the Swedish social model of the labour market, highlighted above.

The book tries to capture the theoretical and practical dimensions of these changes of management styles in both private sector workplaces and the public sector, against the backdrop of similar developments and trends internationally, assessing their impact on the Scandinavian social and management models and practices. It raises the basic question that underpins the 19 chapters of the book, namely, under what historical and social conditions and with what strategies could it be possible to reconcile welfare, equality, good jobs and continued improvement of work environment with competitive companies and economic growth.

This very dense and comprehensive volume tries to answer this basic question by analysing the characteristics and ideologies that underpinned the Scandinavian

welfare and solidarity model and the way they were adapted to the new rules of the game imposed by deregulation, globalization, new forms of management, weakening of the trade unions and of collective bargaining, and growing individualisation, which affect jobs, work content, conditions of work and work environment. These challenges highlight the crucial role of employees, groups and unions to in promoting long-term productivity, welfare and sustainable development.

The book consists of six parts. Part I looks at the contested Scandinavian welfare and solidarity models that were associated with innovation-based workplace reform, that have gradually been replaced in the 1980s and 1990s by foreign management styles, « imported » mainly from the US. This transition highlights the need for trade unions to develop strategies to protect the « losers » in the labour market by developing new arenas and networks, including training, that could attract both winners and losers and strengthen interaction between local and central union levels. A special attention is paid to the challenges that the new world of work faced by Swedish unions.

Part II analyses the Swedish automotive sector, describing the transformation of Volvo from its successful leadership and corporate culture model, based on dialogue, participation and shared goal-orientation, - to a top-down, hierarchical and functional management, following its acquisition by Ford Motor Company. The authors argue that the Swedish car industry will lose its competitive advantage of cooperative industrial relations and highly skilled and motivated blue-collar workers if it merely adopts the global and lean production systems (N.B. With short hindsight it is sad to note how correct this foresight proved to be ... HSA).

Part III looks at the impact of new management approaches on the workforce, labour relations and work environment in

Scandinavia. It starts with two case studies highlighting differing approaches and outcomes of the introduction of new management concepts in manufacturing and construction in Denmark, a country remarkably little affected by neoliberalism (with only few instances of direct attacks on union positions and no retrenchment of the public sector), but not spared by rising hostility towards migrants, even in the period of prosperity and labour shortages. When “lean management” was introduced (around 1990), construction was dominated by few large contractors and consulting engineers. It focused on reducing waste and improving scheduling and planning, with management initiating an ambitious training programme for its building project managers and foremen (carpenters, electricians, plumbers, etc.), who meet weekly and jointly agree on work plans. From the start, the unions viewed “lean construction” as being in the interest of their members, upgrading their skills and empowering them in the execution of work, improving coordination, which produced higher wages and fewer occupational accidents, while not affecting employment levels. The segment of big construction firms thus presents a special case of corporatism, where unions cooperate on an ongoing basis with employers’ associations and with the state, which developed agendas for the development of the sector as a whole. However, “lean management” profited less to rank-and-file workers, while the increased use of East European migrant workers brought about casualisation of employment, downward pressures on pay and working conditions, increasing incidence of moonlighting and polarisation of the workforce. At industry level, it led to the fragmentation of companies, a rapid growth of small single-trade contractors and one-person companies, challenging the integrative values of the Scandinavian welfare models. This contrasts with the experience in manufacturing, given its different struc-

ture and relation with the global economy, where the main new management tool was an imported IT software package (ERP - Enterprise Resource Planning systems) that supported restructuring of the larger Danish corporations towards global manufacturing and outsourcing, emphasizing centralisation, delimiting the support for production teamwork, leaving little room for the local union and employees to influence the adaption or implementation of the system. Unlike the construction sector, there are no state initiatives or intervention in the area of labour market regulation or industrial policies. Turning to the experience of organisational change in Norwegian manufacturing, the authors conclude that new forms of flexible and lean organisation shifted power towards management and dissolved collective solidarity. The frequent group and individual interaction between superiors and subordinates favoured the position of management, weakening collective resistance at the expense of co-responsibility for organisational changes. This section concludes with a thorough reflection about the basic shift in handling work environment in Scandinavia, from being an experimental laboratory of ideas concerning workplace democracy and participation in the 1970s, towards a purely human resources management issue (« HR-ification ») since the 1990s, seen as a management concern to be solved within the enterprise, on par with quality control of production, rather than a forum for social conflict resolution through democratic negotiation and cooperation. This systemic approach tends to lead to more focus on the system and less on the actors. The authors wonder how well this change is suited to deal with the future problems of working life in post-industrial and deregulated societies. They acknowledge that the new system can cope with problems that can be quantified and for which solutions are known, such as accidents, smoke, noise and dirt, but not for more complex

problems such as monotonous, repetitive work and stress. Such problems may be increasingly regarded as a matter for the individual, a question of personality and of self-regulation.

Part IV reviews the differing approaches to the study of gender, work and management, noting that theoretical studies of work organisation tend to emphasise the continued subordination of women, while empirical investigation shows a more positive outcomes.

Part V considers various aspects of modern management and work in Sweden, including the flexibility and boundary less work in IT and media sectors. It includes an analysis of the relationship between new forms of management and flexible firms and outcomes in terms of productivity and job quality, refuting the rhetoric that in the prevalent model of flexible firms working conditions are better. The authors find, *inter alia*, that very few places are flexible and their proportion is not growing; their work environment is not systematically better, though functional flexibility does improve work environment via higher control. The diffusion of modern management is not widespread, it is most common in mechanical engineering, and it has a definite but only weak correlation with productivity and opportunity for employee development. A distinct chapter deals with flexibility and how deregulation in time, space, organisation and employment status shifts responsibility for where and when to work, leading some individuals to work harder and stretch working time by taking work home and even working while being sick... Other issues examined include the interactive media production and changes in union influence via employee company board representation in Sweden. Interestingly, the authors find that Swedish CEOs welcome employee board representation, especially as a means of reducing conflict, legitimising management decisions and implementing difficult changes. Union representatives

also view positively such participation, but there are strong indications that their actual influence is decreasing.

Part VI concludes with an overview of management research in business schools or university departments in Sweden. They combine theoretical and empirical research by twenty-five academics, providing useful insights into how to address the challenges of growing pressures of “lean management” and globalization, growing stress at work and weakening union role and membership.

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Les avocates, les avocats et la conciliation travail-famille

Par Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay et Elena Mascova, Montréal : Les éditions du remue-ménage, 2013, 175 pages. ISBN : 978-2-89091-459-9.

En 1995, le Barreau du Québec signait une *Déclaration de principe sur la conciliation travail-famille*, afin de soutenir les avocates et les avocats dans l’atteinte d’un équilibre entre leurs responsabilités familiales et professionnelles. Dès lors, la conciliation travail-famille devenait un enjeu collectif pour la profession.

Dans cet ouvrage, Tremblay et Mascova ont pour objectif principal d’accéder au vécu des avocates et des avocats afin de contribuer à cette vaste réflexion menée par le Barreau du Québec sur la conciliation travail-famille. Plus précisément, les auteures s’intéressent à la question sous l’angle de la profession et visent à comprendre comment cette conciliation est structurée par les contraintes et les règles de la culture professionnelle, c’est-à-dire par l’éthos professionnel. Elles cherchent également à décortiquer l’influence de facteurs pouvant agir sur les articulations temporelles dans l’environnement familial. Finalement, elles visent à évaluer l’évolution de l’éthos pro-

fessionnel au regard des valeurs ayant cours dans la société. Pour atteindre ces objectifs, les résultats d’entrevues semi-dirigées, menées auprès de 46 avocates et avocats de divers milieux, sont présentés dans cet ouvrage qui comprend quatre chapitres.

S’appuyant principalement sur les données issues d’un sondage mené par le Barreau du Québec en 2008, le chapitre 1 dresse un portrait de la profession juridique. Il y est d’abord constaté que la parité s’avère être pratiquement atteinte, 48,4% des membres du Barreau étant des femmes. Cependant, cette féminisation de la profession n’enraye pas toutes les disparités liées au genre. Les avocates éprouvent, en effet, plus de difficultés à s’établir dans la profession, à accéder à un statut d’associé et elles ont généralement une rémunération moins élevée que celle de leurs confrères masculins. Ces disparités découleraient notamment de l’éthos de la profession, c’est-à-dire des normes et de la culture professionnelle qui déterminent les critères de réussite. Le dévouement total y est valorisé, notamment en termes d’engagement et d’heures travaillées.

Après avoir dressé ce portrait de la profession, les résultats de l’étude sur la conciliation travail-famille sont présentés dans les trois chapitres suivants. À cet égard, les auteures débute en présentant les parcours professionnels des 46 avocates et avocats étudiés, et ce, afin de mieux comprendre la construction des différences observées au préalable entre les hommes et les femmes. Les entretiens révèlent que les trajectoires diffèrent en fonction du genre, puisque les femmes, davantage que les hommes, tentent de concilier le calendrier productif et reproductif. En somme, leur carrière dépend fortement du calendrier reproductif et la conciliation entre les activités familiales et professionnelles semble toujours être l’apanage des femmes.

En réalité, lorsque le désir d’avoir des enfants se manifeste chez les avocates, une remise en question du modèle d’investisse-