

30th International Labour Process Conference 2012



Department of Sociology, Stockholm University, 27-29th March 2012

Call for papers to special stream:

'Lean in ideology and in practice – from labour process and societal effects perspectives'

Now open at www.ilpc.org.uk. Deadline for submissions 31st October 2011

Lean management techniques came to prominence in the 1980s, particularly in automotives. Womack et al.'s (1990) best-selling work, *The Machine That Changed the World*, became the central text for analysing specific Lean techniques and their potential impact on organisational performance. Womack et al.'s core thesis was that organisations which succeed in stripping out wasteful (or non-value-added) processes from production will secure significant efficiency and quality advantages. For these writers, the team became the unique organisational form that was most associated with lean, the base for 'multi-skilling', job rotation, task enlargement and worker participation in *kaizen*, or continuous improvement activity. Since the book's publication, advocates of Lean have promoted a tripartite 'mutual gain' for employers, workers and customers, who will benefit from enhanced product quality and service, arising from the diffusion of Lean practices. The reality of this Lean ideology has been questioned by many writers working in the labour process tradition, also presenting counter evidence. Academic interest in Lean emerged initially in the Japanisation debates of the 1980s and 1990s, an area of study that generated a raft of critical case studies (for example, Danford, 1999; Delbridge, 1998; Elger and Smith, 1994, Garrahan and Stewart, 1992; Rinehart et al. 1997). A group of Swedish working life researchers proposed the label "mean production" as a substitute for Lean Production (Berggren, Björkman & Hollander, 1991). Later works traced the diffusion of lean into indigenous companies and the patterns of workers' struggles that accompanied this (for example, Stewart et al., 2009).

More recently, and through the agency of a plethora of management consultants specialising in Lean transformation programmes, Lean has come to be seen as the prime operational

means of modernizing work organization and working practices in the private and public sectors. For instance, we have seen a rapid diffusion of Lean systems into some call centre environments and into public service work domains such as health care and government departments. There are however different interpretations of these developments, different interpretations of the true nature of Lean itself and also very different attitudes to Lean among managers, unions and employees. There are also obviously "societal effects" (Maurice & Sorge, 2000) on the implementation of Lean. Indeed, as Elger and Smith (2005) noted, it may be wrong to assume uniformity in process and outcomes since variations in practice are likely to exist as a result of such factors as firm, size, sector, industrial relations and locality dynamics. In Scandinavia, for instance, there is a widespread diffusion of Lean and the result of research of employee attitudes to Lean shows a heterogeneous pattern. The unions first tried to resist the introduction of Lean but some unions have recently changed position and now see possibilities for empowerment in Lean.

This stream calls for papers that offer theoretical and empirical analysis of the variations in contemporary developments in Lean management regimes and their implications for workers and trade unions. We are interested in papers that provide insights into the specific nature and effects of Lean in different societies and employment sectors, the processes that drive Lean diffusion, such as the role of management consultants, the true nature of Lean and the ways in which trade unions engage with the challenges of Lean at the workplace level.

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To read more about the general conference, this and other special streams, and to submit abstracts (350-500 words in length), please visit the ILPC-website: www.ilpc.org.uk. Abstracts are externally refereed and papers must not have been previously published or presented elsewhere. Decisions on acceptance will be made in December 2011. Please follow the online instructions.

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