The Temporary Contact and Bureaucracy in a UK Employment Agency: Fashioning the Neoliberal Subject?

As the global financial crisis worsens and business battens down the hatches the UK workforce are placed under ever more pressure. Those lucky enough to be employed in the current climate face potentially frustrating changes in the workplace. Increasingly, employers seek to cut costs by disbanding or scaling down their human resources departments and shifting these responsibilities onto employment agencies. Both the instance of precarious, temporary work and subsequent increases in bureaucracy accompany these shifts. This research would attempt an ethnographic take on these changes from the basis of Foucault's theory of neoliberal governmentality.

Foucault theorises neoliberalism as a specific form of governmentality in which a malleable human subject is produced through encounters with certain institutions such as the workplace, the school or the prison. The theory suggests that neoliberalism is a political ideology and a historically specific type of subjectivity. Rose (1989) expands on Foucault by showing that throughout modernity the subjectivity of the populace comes to be of increasing importance for government. Such technologies as psychological expertise make their way into the private arena, altering and fashioning the subject and recreating the individual as a self-regulating, competitive consumer. Read (2009) expands by stating that the temporary contract can be seen as a subjectifying technology through its tendency to break up the mass workforce of Fordist production replacing it with atomised individuals who are encouraged to compete over scarce work and resources. Workplace bureaucracy has also been seen as a technology of neoliberal governmentality in the case of academic 'audit culture'.

In recent years attempts have been made to analyse these changes. Thompson (2003) discusses the technologies of surveillance and peer pressure as managerial practices in the setting of a call centre. The 'Labour Process' method adopted, however, is lacking in ethnography which would enlighten as to the effects and receptions of such technologies. Watson (2011) uses ethnography in order to understand the inner workings of organisations. However his overly structural approach tends to underplay the experience of those working in these organisations. Kunda (1992) bridges the gap between structure and agency somewhat by focusing on experience *and* organisation. However the work is twenty years old and thus cannot perceive further fragmentations in working organisations which have occurred since. Kunda also fails to acknowledge an intellectual debt to Foucault and neglects to link a broader neoliberalism with the micro culture. Kondo's (1990) ethnography of subject creation and gender in a Japanese workplace is similarly outdated, and although the work is Foucauldian, it fails to link changes in the workplace subjectification with the broader trends of neoliberalism. There is space, then, for an ethnography which has the scope to deal with organisational changes and fragmentation on the structural level while also being able to observe how these changes affect those who encounter them as part of their daily existence. This micro level ethnographic study should link its findings to broader trends, such as neoliberalism so as to remain relevant to macro level theory.

What is needed is an anthropological focus informed by both macro theory and the heterogeneity of the micro as captured by the ethnographic method. It is important to update the literature on the workplace and the subjectifying technologies at play there in light of new changes in organisational structure and managerial technologies.

Anthropologists have examined the workplace using the theory of neoliberal subject production: for call centre workers (Winiecki, 2007); for how the governance of the subject is enacted through the 'anticipation of harm' in road-building projects in Peru (Knox and Harvey, 2011) and in Suzhi discourse in China (Hairong, 2003). But there has yet to be a study which looks at the technologies of the temporary contract and bureaucracy as aspects of neoliberal subject creation. I propose to achieve this through an organisational study which examines both the structural and the experiential elements of a contemporary employment agency, allowing us to understand both the type of subject being produced and the specific nature of the institution which utilises the technologies of this production. I follow Kunda in this approach and hope to utilise the benefits of sustained ethnographic research in order to chart both the organisational structure of such an agency and the differential experience of those involved in it.

Kipnis argues that anthropologists have reified and overused the term neoliberalism. When seen as an all-encompassing era or epoch 'neoliberalism' can disguise more than it discloses by obscuring the heterogeneity of the social world. The theory of neoliberal governmentality has the same potential pitfalls. However, the theory has the ability to reach between the macro and micro due to its concern with human subjectivity. In response to the potential problems with use of the macro in anthropological research, I suggest an ethnographic approach which follows on from the work on development by Obeid, who uses ethnography to show how the discourses of development are appropriated differently in whatever setting they are encountered and that often their effects are different form those originally intended. I intend to avoid simply assuming the relevance or irrelevance of macro theory, and instead use macro-level theory as an entry point to the heterogeneous micro-level phenomena of the social world. The theory of neoliberal governmentality shall be viewed pragmatically as a starting block for thinking critically about contemporary UK working conditions. We may ask: what type of subject is being produced through these technologies and is the theoretical formulation of neoliberalism a relevant one?

The ethnographic research will be an organisational and experiential study of a temporary employment agency which operates as an outsourced human resources department. As mentioned, ethnographic appraisals of organisations are somewhat outdated in that they struggle to deal with the fragmentation inherent in the post-Fordist neoliberal workplace. Both Kunda (1992) and Wright (1994) deal with an organisation and its culture as a whole, thus failing to capture this fragmentation. To overcome this I shall use a multi-sited approach, which is able to chart disjointed organisational structures through its emphasis on relations and associations across two or more sites. I intend, initially, to begin with semi-structured interviewing, snowballing and participant observation with temporary workers themselves. Sustained ethnographic research should yield opportunities to better understand their experience of and encounters with the technologies of the temporary contract and bureaucracy. From here I hope to follow the chain of command from the temporary workers themselves to those involved in their employment, recording the structure of the organisation as I go, in order to chronicle differential receptions to and permeations of these subjectifying technologies in potentially disparate locations. Problems over payment and general problems at work will offer the opportunity to observe this procedural structure in action.

There may be some trouble finding an agency or company which would allow this type of research. However there has been preliminary contact with such an organisation in Cumbria and of course an ethical and confidential approach are, and will be, assured. Preliminary interviews, therefore, could be carried out straight away. It is expected that this study would

have a relevance which reaches further than its academic foundation. Though the work would certainly further anthropological study of the workplace, the issues of the temporary contract and subject creation, it can be seen that, due to the rise in temporary and flexible work and workplace bureaucracy, this study has potentially a wider social significance. Such work-related phenomena as the temporary contract and bureaucracy make up an essential part of the contemporary UK worker's experience, hence I believe that the study would appeal to all of those who have encountered and struggled with such phenomena.

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