Care in revolt: Labor conflict, gender, neoliberalism

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AKADEMISK AVHANDLING

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Abstract

The present thesis is an exploration of normalization processes and the problem of appropriation in labor conflict. More specifically, it explores the way contemporary labor conflicts in nursing relate to, and thereby help to illuminate, changes in modes of gender normalization under neoliberalism, and how nurse labor conflict thereby sheds light on wider patterns of labor strife. Analysis shows how a “virtue script” bound up with long-lasting patterns of gender normalization in nursing becomes tangled with forms of abstract labor related to “new public management” reform. Although the restructuring of work threatens public professionals’ autonomy, at the same time, it provides opportunities for resistance through collective action. What is more, neoliberal restructuring facilitates the appropriation by nurses and, by implication, other public workers, of the discourses and ideals that belonged to the ethos of the Keynesian welfare state. However, this is a contradictory process, since discourses and ideals thus appropriated inhere in modes of labor exploitation and normalization. Analysis indicates that while appropriation furthers collective mobilization, and while it can radically transform the entities it takes possession of, this is an open-ended process that may reinforce gendered and exploitative ideas about work.

This interview study is mainly based on four journal articles, attending to different aspects of an act of collective resignation taken by registered nurses at a Swedish hospital ward. This is an emerging form of collective action and the thesis provides one of the first analyses of this new grassroots and workplace-based phenomenon, which may be considered its particular empirical contribution. On the other hand, the chapters of the cover essay unfold a sustained argument on normalization and appropriation, thereby elaborating theoretical themes broached in the articles. The focal point of this discussion is a certain concept of form, deployed in Marxist and feminist theory, a concept pointing to the identity of thought-forms and practically enacted forms. Further, these forms migrate: they are evoked in practices wherein “the mind is not active as sentient” (Hegel), later to be projected by the mind onto different entities. The results of the discussion thus question common approaches to normalization. In particular, it is untenable to oppose a tacit and internal mode of control where individuals are induced to comply by attaching to identifications (by becoming/being made into subjects) to an overt and external mode reliant on sheer coercion. This matter–form dichotomy should be dissolved, and modes of coercion should be understood to leave subjective imprints—not at the level of identity but at the level of thought’s infrastructure, that is, form.

Keywords: appropriation, dialectics, feminism, gender, ideal worker, labor conflict, Marxism, neoliberalism, normalization, NPM, real abstraction, real subsumption