

Vi som stannade på Volvo
– en etnologisk studie om äldre
bilindustriarbetares arbetsliv
och framtidsplaner

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Abstract

Vi som stannade på Volvo – en etnologisk studie om äldre bilindustriarbetares arbetsliv och framtidsplaner

(We Who Stayed at Volvo – An Ethnological Study of Senior Automobile-Industry Blue-Collar Workers' Working-Lives and Future Plans)

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The starting points for this doctoral thesis are two much discussed issues in Sweden: the consequences of the demographic development with an ageing population and the changes that have taken place in the working life in Sweden as a result of, or in response to, the so called globalisation. The most often suggested solution to the challenge of the growth of an ageing population is that people will have to remain in employment higher up in the ages than at present.

My aim is to understand how the work experiences of ageing blue collar workers have affected how they look on their past and present life as well as their possibilities to continue to

work until the age of 65 or older, and if this is desirable. For this purpose I have interviewed sixteen elderly blue collar workers at the car manufacturing plant Volvo Torslandaverken in Gothenburg, some union representatives as well as some white collar workers.

My basic theoretical starting point is historical materialism. I see capital as a constant and ever present part of the power structure in society and class as a continuous cultural process, a subjective experience of solidarity and/or conflict. I also analyze the importance of gender and ethnicity, in the spirit of a long ethnological tradition of studying workers, working life, and working-class culture.

The empirical chapters, based on the interviews, describe the background and the working life histories of the workers how these experiences have affected them. It is evident how the blue collar workers have a permanent feeling of subjugation caused by a number of everyday incidents in the workplace depending on the power structure in the company. It is also clear that their influence over their own working life has decreased as they have become older. Nevertheless the interviewed workers show a high grade of job satisfaction, mostly because of the positive fellowship among themselves, but also because of their competence in carrying out a comparatively well paid job, which has made it possible for them to live a good life with self-esteem and dignity.

My conclusion is, nevertheless, that a prolonged working life is not seen as desirable by the workers for three main reasons: health issues brought about through long-term physical labour, especially as regards the women, less motivation caused by a sense of subordination, diminished influence and fewer opportunities at work when ageing, and finally the frequent pension scheme offers by the company. Class related norms based on fairness also have an effect. None of the interviewed workers want to change their present tasks before retirement and most of them want to retire at the age of 60 or earlier. My study also shows that the development of the industrial production at Volvo during the last decade, with more assembly line and lean production, has impaired the possibilities for elderly workers. There is a risk that increased stress, monotony, and less influence lead to an increased exclusion of people from the labour market, which leads to a working life that is not sustainable in the long run.

Keywords: working life, elderly workers, ageing population, working-class culture, industrial work, Volvo, class identity, retirement age, meaning of work, influence and norms at work.

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