Un-learning to labour?

Activating the unemployed in a former industrial community

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Abstract

In the aftermath of automation and globalisation of production, the Western welfare states have come to leave industrial society behind in favour of an increasingly competitive and service-oriented economy. Nevertheless, there are many environments whose inhabitants still identify with the culture that developed in typical industrial communities. In addition to high unemployment rates, these environments are often burdened by a situated lack of study tradition whereby unemployed people still aspire to occupy manual labour despite a lack of such jobs. This thesis examines the attempts to break with the reproduction of a manual working-class culture in a former industrial community in Sweden. Using ethnographic methods, it explores how so-called activation policy intending to reduce public expenditures on economic benefits in favour of fostering responsible and employable individuals, is translated locally given the community's situated rationality. With theoretical inspiration from the governmentality perspective, literature on social class, as well as Boltanski and Thévenot's economic-sociological pragmatism, the analysis shows how the municipality's translation of activation policy tended to incorporate rather than transform a manual working-class culture in the activation of unemployed. The thesis argues that this hindered the market imperatives and logic of self-realisation pervading activation policy to take root in the activation schemes. Furthermore, the thesis points to how concepts such as inclusion and exclusion, which are central to the active society orientation, appeared ambiguous in light of unemployed who already nurtured a sense of belonging and social attachment. By deepening our understanding of situated rationalities and how they may compete with the logic imbuing supranational policy recommendations on activation and active inclusion, these are conclusions of interest to both policy makers and actors involved in the activation of unemployed locally.