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Abstract

De-skilling and reduced worker autonomy? Lean construction and neo-taylorist management systems in Sweden.

Lean construction (LC) is an established practice in Swedish construction since 2007 – albeit in fragmented and discrepant ways. While most construction-related firms and trades do not use LC in a substantial way, there are succinct examples of companies that have made advances in the application of LC over the years. This includes both contractors and trades working largely on-site, and those employing a fully industrialised production process (Kifokeris, 2021, Kifokeris & Koch, 2022). The application of LC relates typically to design, planning, management, and/or production, with much of its success tied to improving technical process parameters – including streamlining production, and deploying just-in-time planning and supply chains in order to eliminate activities that create little market value for the client (Kifokeris, 2021). At the same time, as with management systems employing lean in other industries (e.g., manufacturing), there are concerns about who gets involved in planning and decision-making processes, thus limiting emancipatory effects and learning outcomes. Further, the transformation of construction management in the last decade is structurally changing the Swedish construction sector (Ahlstrand, 2022). As large production segments are outsourced and both major and minor firms rely on subcontractors – including posted workers from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) – combining construction management and LC potentially reveals processes of fragmentation and limitation for those (blue-collar workers) involved in the construction work, crafts, and trades.

Setting off from labour process theory (Thompson & Smith, 2010), this paper analyses how parallel processes of construction management and LC affect the day-to-day work at construction sites in Sweden. Based on both survey data, qualitative interviews, and construction site visits, we show that LC practices potentially create a dynamic that structures an already fragmented workforce into different segments of skilled and unskilled labour. Among others, this dynamic calls back to the rift between Green (1999) and Howell & Ballard (2000), indicating that the implementation of LC within construction management in Sweden still seems to be largely devoid of organizational, local, and cultural contexts – and reveals a disintegrated labour process. In that vein, we draw on Haakestad and Friberg's (2017) conceptualisation of a managerial shift from a craft-centred system towards one of neo-taylorist principles. This shift implies a change in work practices with an increased work intensity, reduced worker autonomy, and a loss of control of the labour process. As a result, and considering the diversification of the workforce with pre-dominantly posted workers from CEE engaging in low-skill work (because of their relatively low price), we argue that the Swedish construction sector experiences processes of de-skilling, which comprise a separation between mental and manual labour. As site management increasingly controls the labour, the worker's experience and individual judgement is of less or no importance. Consequently, while LC can include practices that involve workers without breaking the labour process, we indeed show that neo-taylorist principles that follow the combination of LC with construction management can lead to deskilling and reduced worker autonomy in the Swedish context.