Psychological Technologies at Work: A History of Employee Development in Denmark

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Inspired by Michel Foucault's analysis of governmental and ethical practices, this article seeks to repoliticize the contemporary quest for employee development by analysing how the psychological technologies have been used to govern individuals and human relations at Danish workplaces since the beginning of the 20th century. It is argued that while the technologies circulating under the headings of psycho-technics and mental hygiene both assumed that the workers freely subjected themselves to managerial deliberations, it is only the employee development techniques launched from the late 1980s that take ethics, the work the individual exerts upon him- or herself and thereby his or her exercise of freedom, as their key principle of operation.

Keywords: ethics, industrial democracy, governmentality, power, psychological technologies, psycho-technics

Introduction

> The personal resources of its employees are the most important assets of a Danish workplace. The wise workplace gives its employees a chance to be involved in decision-making and have influence – this creates engagement, pleasure in one's work and a sense of responsibility with regard to both the process and the product. (Danish Confederation of Trade Unions, 2000: 3)

There seems today to be a strong consensus in Denmark on the need to strengthen and develop employee competencies, and to enable employees to participate in the decision-making processes that influence the organization of job tasks at work. On the one hand, this is

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seen as necessary in order to meet the needs of companies allegedly exposed to increasing international competition, increasing demands of flexibility and innovation, and increasing customer service orientation. On the other hand, many employees aspire to a challenging and inspiring job that will allow them to express themselves, develop their creative potential, find satisfaction and possibly identify with their work. Despite certain critical voices, concerned with the exploitative potential of this development, for the past two decades employers, governments, labour unions and even many academics have largely agreed on the importance of strengthening and developing employee capabilities and competencies – in order to spur on the competitiveness of local business and industries and, thereby, preserve the foundations of the welfare state (see Larsen et al., 1995: 147–55).

Studies of the many new management tools circulating in Danish workplaces, such as individual self-development, team-building and group dynamics, have claimed that such tools present a radical break with collectivism and labour ideology and that if they had been targeted at blue-collar workers in the 1970s they would have been regarded as bourgeois reforms aimed at exploiting the working class (Keldorff, 1998). While I largely concur with the thesis that the management tools emerging in the 1980s present an important break with previous management practices, it is worth noting that the application of psychological technologies targeting employees has a history dating back to the start of the 20th century. By the same token, while the emergence of various forms of techniques seeking to know and govern the workers have without doubt been heavily informed by events and experiences outside Denmark, it would not be correct to view the new managerial practices as the appropriation of essentially foreign and exotic modes of thought, whether in the form of neoliberal ideology or in the form of New Age cosmologies (Bovbjerg, 2001).

The overall aim of this article is to repoliticize the contemporary quest for employee development in Denmark, supported vigorously by employers and trade unions alike, by demonstrating that this quest for personal and competence development may be viewed as a recasting of a set of individualizing psychological technologies that have been present on the Danish labour market since the beginning of the 20th century.[1] It is argued that the governmental practices subsumed under the heading of employee development depend above all upon a free, but nonetheless highly structured,

ethical conduct whereby individuals subject themselves in accordance with norms of personal and competency development.

Critical Analyses of Employee Development and Empowerment

Attempts to promote job enrichment and employee development and empowerment have not passed without critique. A common critical approach is a largely internalist one, based on the evaluation of the objectives and promises found within management policies and programmes. This line of critique essentially revolves around the imprecise definition (e.g. Keenoy and Anthony, 1992) and/or lack of implementation of the 'right' (humanistic) version of human resource development and management (HRDM) (e.g. Legge, 1989; McArdle et al., 1995). The result, these critics argue, is that such policies systematically favour management. Others have criticized employee empowerment at the ideological level, claiming that while HRDM may enhance freedom and autonomy it is distorted and restricted due to the managerial bias of these practices (Potterfield, 1999). The main limitation of these various critiques is that it is difficult to identify the ways in which HRDM informs and shapes the way we act at the workplace. By viewing freedom as the absence of the distorting influence of power and ideology, the approach also assumes that the 'soft', human developmental dimension of HRDM is a moral good.

One attempt to overcome this limitation has been to resort to Michel Foucault's genealogical analysis of the ways in which objectifying expert knowledge and various disciplinary mechanisms have furnished new modes of labour management (e.g. Kerfoot and Knights, 1992; Miller and O'Leary, 1987; Townley, 1993). By drawing primarily on Foucault's writings in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977) on the emergence and spread of disciplinary techniques of surveillance, examination and normalization, these studies have contributed significantly to the understanding of the ways in which workers are turned into the objects of both knowledge and disciplinary mechanisms. Yet these studies tend either to neglect the issue of subjectivity and the practices by which workers constitute themselves as subjects, or to deal with this only as an issue of 'self-discipline', i.e. as a series of self-imposed restrictions weighing down upon the workers' subjectivity and inhibiting their freedom. For example, Kerfoot and Knights argue that team-building

programmes in the UK should be seen as strengthening management control through greater measuring and monitoring of productivity and performance, and as an increase in workers' 'self-discipline' (Kerfoot and Knights, 1992: 665–6).

Government, Ethics and Critique

Another group of studies draw upon Michel Foucault's notions of government and ethics. They have, in various ways, sought to illuminate how political rationalities and expert knowledge on work have informed particular conceptions of the subject at work and how best to manage it (Donzelot, 1981/2; du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Miller and Rose, 1995; Rose, 1989; Townley, 1994). Others have analysed the managerial devices and techniques that seek to shape the conduct of individuals by urging the latter to think about and conduct themselves in line with organizational goals (Covaleski et al., 1998; du Gay, 1996). In these studies, government signifies the rationalities and practices of conducting the conduct of others (of individuals and populations in a society). Government is not to be understood in its institutional sense (the government), nor is it limited to the actions of the state, but here entails the entire set of techniques, knowledge and strategies for acting on and influencing the conduct of others through a range of different authorities (Foucault, 1988, 1991).

Ethics, on the other hand, denotes the work that the self exerts upon itself. In order to clarify the notion of ethics, Foucault made a distinction between liberty and liberation processes (including the struggles to dismantle various forms of political dominance and economic exploitation) on the one hand, and freedom viewed as the practices whereby the self acts upon itself, i.e. ethics. While liberty is a precondition for the ethical work of the self, one cannot reduce the analysis of freedom to that of the struggle against forces of domination and exploitation. Rather, freedom must be analysed as the set of practices whereby the individual scrutinizes and acts upon him/herself and, in so doing, decides what freedom is and how it should be exercised (Foucault, 1994). A crucial point is that this ethical work, which constitutes freedom, does not take place in a vacuum but is always strategically related to relations of power, such as bodies of objectifying knowledge, norms of proper conduct, and techniques seeking to discipline and govern others.[2]

Conversely, the exercise of power – except in cases of total domination – actually depends to a varying extent and in varying forms on subjects conducting themselves freely. In general terms one can distinguish between three modalities of interaction between power and freedom, namely objectification, subjectification and self-subjectification. Objectification refers to the bodies of expert knowledge, such as psychology and sociology, seeking to render various problematizations into knowledge in a form amenable to intervention. On the basis of various epistemological taxonomies these systems of objectification will seek to provide an answer to the questions: Who is the worker? And what psychic and/or social needs and forces are guiding his/her behaviour? Subjectification refers to those technologies whereby others seek to turn the worker into an acting being based on a particular objectification and understanding of the worker, such as an individual in need of meaningful work or satisfying human interrelations. Consequently, subjectification implies that the individual is urged to act not just in any way, but in accordance with particular norms and understanding of who the worker is. While both objectifying and subjectifying technologies will imply an element of freedom on behalf of the worker in order to talk about a relation of power in the sense outlined earlier, they do not take the worker's freedom as their main mode of functioning. Self-subjectification, in contrast, denotes the types of managerial actions that take the worker's exercise of freedom, i.e. the ethical work the individual conducts on him/herself, as their primary means. While objectification and subjectification are necessary elements here as well, these managerial techniques work above all through the individual's own objectification of who he/she is and what his/her needs are, and the worker's own demands for more challenging and enriching work. Managerial techniques working through self-subjectification seek to facilitate and induce ways in which workers reflect and act upon their relations with themselves and represent as such the most indirect but nonetheless highly power-laden mode of governing the workplace.

In this article I utilize the term 'psychological technologies' to denote the diverse practices, techniques and modes of judgement concerning human subjects and their interrelations. These include not only those practices subsumed under the heading of a 'psy' prefix, such as psycho-technics and mental hygiene, but also those confessional techniques seeking to verbalize and manage grievances (such as individual interviews and questionnaires) and those

seeking to govern human relations (such as group dialogue and team-building). Inspired by Nikolas Rose, I seek to analyse the historical role of psychological technologies deployed at the workplace, not in terms of the evolution of ideas or theories or in terms of the application of what are often viewed as pure theories, but rather in terms of how these technical tools latched onto particular claims to truth and authority and particular norms of proper conduct (Rose, 1998: 81–101).

An analysis of workplace relations which focuses on the shifting ways in which mundane human technologies enabled particular translations of disciplinary ambitions through the workers' exercise of freedom through objectification, subjectification and more recently self-subjectification may seem an overtly modest and restrictive way of criticizing current management practices. In particular, the failure to provide a programme for launching alternatives or a platform for employee resistance may appear as a surrender to the status quo. Yet considering the amazing speed with which management gurus and their psychological engineers come up with 'alternative' and allegedly more efficient employee empowerment techniques, I do not really believe that posing alternatives is a particularly effective mode of critique. Moreover, as the many voices of critique and protest currently circulating in the Danish workplace seem to indicate, there is really little need for intellectuals to set themselves up as theoreticians of resistance, telling workers and other exploited groups why, when and how to resist.[3] Instead, this article adopts a form of critique that is based not on norms of what constitutes good and bad forms of work, but on a form of analysis seeking to illuminate the specific idea that power is exercised at the workplace by taking freedom as its precondition. In line with Foucault's critical ontology of ourselves, this 'exemplary critique' involves showing how and by what power-laden and normalizing techniques and knowledge we became what we are, rather than theorizing the need and ways to resist these power and freedom games (see Owen, 1994: 160–2, 204–13).

The Emergence and Development of Psycho-Technics at Work

The latter half of the 19th century witnessed a rapid development in the Danish manufacturing industry combined with a rising influx of mainly poor and landless migrants from the rural areas. This

development set the stage for the eruption of a series of large-scale industrial conflicts. In 1885, the employers of the iron and metallurgical industries conducted a five-month-long lockout in order to counteract workers' attempts to organize themselves and to introduce collective bargaining regarding wages and workplace conditions (Due et al., 1993: 67–8). In 1896, the Employers' Association was established with the support of a large part of the most important employers' associations in the trade, crafts and industrial sectors.

While trade unions, with the widespread support of the various labour groups, had been in operation since 1871, it was decided that their actions were insufficiently coordinated, so in 1898 most of these unions united under the banner of the National Federation of Trade Unions in order to be able to conduct effective strikes and to support employees during strike action (Due et al., 1993: 72–3). These events precipitated, in 1899, the massive lockout initiated by the Danish Employers' Association against all members of the National Federation of Trade Unions – a move which was to become the largest labour conflict hitherto experienced in Europe. The conflict was resolved by the agreement known as the September Settlement, under which the workers' right to organize and the employers' right to manage and control the work were mutually accepted (Buchardt, 1982: 7). While this brought an immediate end to so-called wildcat strikes, disagreement and conflicts over wage and working conditions did not disappear and lockouts and strikes were therefore not an uncommon phenomenon in the ensuing decades, although they now took a more regulated form – including state arbitration (Due et al., 1993: 79–86).

It was in the midst of these dramatic events that, hardly noticed by the public, the Psychophysical Laboratory was established in 1886 in three dark, damp cellar rooms in central Copenhagen. With paltry financial support from the Ministry of Culture, the laboratory was established at the initiative of Dr Alfred Lehmann, who in the previous year had been a student of Professor Wundt at the Institut für experimentelle Psychologie in Leipzig, which served as a model for the Danish laboratory. Immediately after the opening of the laboratory in Copenhagen, Lehmann started lecturing in psychology and supervising psychophysical experimental studies for university students. From 1894, Lehmann's laboratory came under the financial auspices of the Ministry of Churches and Education, and from April that year it was incorporated into the University of

Copenhagen, though an actual university degree in psychology was not established until 1918.

The spread of psychophysical techniques to the workplaces was a slow one. As early as 1888, Lehmann began to give speeches at various Danish workplaces to argue for the necessity and benefit of his psychophysical methods but with little effect (Funch, 1986: 18). In 1905, Lehmann published his book *On Bodily and Mental Work* (*Om legemligt og aandeligt Arbejde*), intended as a university textbook. In the book, job satisfaction is depicted as an entirely individually defined entity:

> The meaning of work for the individual. The happiness, satisfaction, the only goal of all human endeavour is dependent not only on the volume and extent of the pleasures, but equally on the worries and the sufferings. In order to obtain satisfaction, labour is necessary in a double sense. First, work is necessary for the large majority of humans to acquire the physical means to pleasure and the alleviation of suffering, and, second, it is an unconditional necessity for the psychophysiological condition for everyone to experience intense pleasure. (Lehmann, 1905: 3; cited in Vidriksen, 1986: 148)

Lehmann went on to qualify this assertion by arguing that work could be a source of pleasure only insofar as it did not incur enduring fatigue; this would imply not only that work capacity is reduced, but also that the the individual is left more susceptible to suffering and less capable of enjoyment. Therefore it was seen to be of crucial importance that any work be conducted as economically and efficiently in terms of input of labour as possible. Yet experience showed, Lehmann argued, that this ideal situation was rarely found in reality and, therefore, 'it is not only scientific but also of practical importance to determine the most efficient work procedure in the various cases' (Lehmann, 1905: 3; cited in Vidriksen, 1986: 148).

Although the experimental facilities, the various types of tests conducted and the number of students attending the Psychophysical Laboratory gradually expanded during the ensuing decades, the first systematic experiment of any scale outside the laboratory first took place in 1918. At the request of the Danish Army's air force section, Lehmann developed and conducted a series of psychotechnical tests, including the measurement of sense of balance, judgement of distance, reaction times and attention during situations of stress, in order to evaluate the suitability of aspiring military pilots (Lehmann, 1918).

The psychological technologies began circulating in civil workplaces from the mid-1920s. In 1924, a psycho-technical section was opened in the Central Employment Service Office of the municipalities of Copenhagen and Frederiksberg in order to undertake psycho-technical and medical examinations of apprentices and trainees, office clerks, applicants for certain positions in governmental offices and persons with disabilities. The aim of the tests, which included the measurement of intelligence, memory capacity, capacity for visual perception and touch, was to evaluate the extent to which the individual was 'in possession of the mental and physical abilities and qualities necessary to become a skilful worker in his trade, or whether alternatively that individual possesses abilities or qualities that disqualify him or her for entrance into that trade' (Vedel-Petersen, 1924: 138). The Central Employment Service Office, which became the Psycho-Technical Institute in 1929, was consulted by a broad range of persons and private and public companies: one estimate puts the number of tests conducted between 1924 and 1942 at more than 45,000, another estimate put the number of tests between 1924 and 1950 at approximately 100,000 (Sjallung, 1942: 10–11; Anonymous, 1952: 92).

In order to cope with an increasing national demand for psycho-technical tests, three more psycho-technical institutes were opened between 1934 and 1942. One was opened in Randers in central Jutland (1934), a second was opened in Odense in central Fyn (1936), and a peripatetic Psycho-Technic Committee was established in 1942 to cater for employment services on Zealand outside Copenhagen (Anonymous, 1942: 81). While these last three did not have the same scope or facilities as the institute in Copenhagen, they effectively served to create a nationwide grid of institutions providing psycho-technical expertise and conducting thousands of tests every year for both private and public organizations.

It is significant that the results of the psycho-technical tests were for guidance only and not legally binding, and that it was ultimately a matter for the individual tested in cooperation with his or her employers (or parents) to decide what consequences the tests should have (Vedel-Petersen, 1924: 143). In the book *Choice of Life Position through Self Study*, published in 1931, psychologist Dr Bahnsen, who was responsible for developing and conducting the tests at the Psycho-Technical Institute in Copenhagen, emphasized that with regard to a person's choice of occupation:

> It is *You* who have to choose and only You yourself can make the decision. All the psycho-technicians in the world cannot tell you what you should become. And all that this book can offer You is a guide for the ways one can go to explore the life positions and find out about oneself. (Bahnsen, 1931; cited in Vidriksen, 1986: 165)

Needless to say the element of choice was a restricted one inasmuch as employers often required that job applicants underwent a psycho-technical test as part of the recruitment procedure. Nonetheless, there were few protests lodged against these practices and many young people chose to subject themselves to these tests – simply to have a better idea of what occupation would suit them best.

Perhaps it was this ability of the psycho-technical procedures to latch onto the ways in which individuals freely questioned, scrutinized and governed themselves that contributed to their acceptance and gradual dissemination throughout Danish workplaces. True, the activities of the psycho-technical institutes and committee were taken over in the 1960s by the state, under the Ministry of Labour, and during the next decade they would all be dismantled. Psycho-technics would no longer be primarily an issue for state agencies. Yet this should not be taken as a sign of the declining importance of psycho-technics. On the contrary, the psycho-technical procedures would not only spread to an even wider set of both public and private, military and civilian organizations, they would also come to include individuals at all levels of the organizational hierarchy. Thus, whereas the individualized testing and measuring of skills and suitability of applicants and employees during the interwar period had mainly targeted the 'man on the shopfloor' (recruits and privates in military organizations, and trainees, apprentices and blue-collar workers in civilian workplaces), these techniques would be increasingly applied to management levels during the 1950s and 1960s (officers in the military services and executives and mid-level managers in civilian workplaces) (Castenskiold, 1959: 192–3).

Ultimately, from the 1980s, psycho-technics would spawn a whole consultancy industry, whose primary product would be the provision of expertise in the psychological screening of job applicants for both public and private sector workplaces. However, although psycho-technical tests and tools became increasingly more widespread and were attributed increasing importance in the labour market during the 20th century, they also underwent important

transformations: the most important being the inclusion of preoccupations concerning human interaction and social relations at work.

Mental Hygiene and Human Relations at Work

During the 1950s and 1960s, the individualizing psycho-technical tools were significantly transformed, albeit not replaced, by the influence of the movements for industrial democracy and mental hygiene. One sees in this period a juxtaposition of the question of how human relations at the workplace can be reformed in order to meet workers' psychosocial needs and well-being, with the old psycho-technical question of how the individual worker may most appropriately be placed in a given trade according to his or her measured psychological (and physiological) predispositions. Psycho-technics would no longer be applied solely in order to gauge the suitability of job applicants, but would be increasingly and regularly applied to employees in order to monitor and optimize human relations at work.

Industrial Democracy

Industrial democracy was hotly debated between the employers' organizations and the trade unions in the years immediately following the end of the Second World War. The Danish trade unions had witnessed how industrial councils had developed on the continent after the First World War, and how joint production consultative committees had been established in Britain during the Second World War, giving workers a certain influence on decisions concerning technology and job procedures. The National Federation of Trade Unions found that the time had now come to expand the scope of the function of the shop steward, established in 1900, and that of the workshop technical councils, which had existed in the Danish metallurgical industries since 1926, in order to incorporate more fundamental decisions affecting the individual workplace and to include all sectors of the labour market (Lund, 1958: 4–6).[4]

Between 1945 and 1947, the National Federation of Trade Unions, who envisaged the creation of a three-tier council system with labour representation at national, industry and company levels, engaged in

a series of negotiations with the rather reluctant Danish Employers' Association. These negotiations resulted in an agreement to establish cooperation committees in all workplaces within the manufacturing and craft sectors, in order to improve production, promote job satisfaction, enhance employees' interest in the company's operations, and maintain good and stable relations at the workplace (*Overenskomsten om Samarbejdsudvalg af*, 6 June 1947). From their inception, the cooperation committees proved to be an important forum for the discussion and settlement of disputes pertaining to production and productivity (including both the physical and administrative design of job procedures), employee health and safety, employment conditions (hiring and firing), continuing education and personnel questions (including disciplinary procedures for individual workers), and thereby the committees actually ensured the workers a certain influence over their workplace (Lund, 1958: 31–64; Samarbejdsnævnet, 1972).

However, not until the late 1960s was the role of the cooperation committees conceived from the perspective of human relations, that is to address questions of how economic and technological changes affect human relations and well-being at the workplace and how these, in turn, influence productivity and technological innovation. In 1966, the Ministry of Labour appointed the Committee Concerning Conditions in the Workplace, consisting of representatives of the employers and the unions and leading economists, sociologists and psychologists to 'examine the most important changes which modern production technology implies for the influence and expression of the human factor at work' (Arbejdsministeriet, 1971: 7). In its report, the committee acknowledged that the importance of the cooperation committees in securing employee influence in the workplace was widely accepted, but, at the same time, pointed out that this had been effected largely through the shop stewards and not directly by the employees (Arbejdsministeriet, 1971: 122). After intensive research into experience with various forms of industrial relations, employee influence on production and behavioural experiments in other countries, the committee concluded in overtly broad terms that employee motivation and well-being were important for productivity and innovation and that the trend towards increased democratization of the workplace – in the sense of enhanced employee influence – should proceed on the basis of traditional voluntary agreements between the employers and the trade unions (Arbejdsministeriet, 1971: 150–9). Perhaps what is most interesting

about the committee's report is not its cautious conclusion but the fact that it conveyed in systematic fashion what it saw as the preconditions for industrial democracy. At societal level, industrial democracy would depend upon a prevalence of democratic attitudes and institutions, at organizational level it would depend upon the technological system and its specific organizational adoption, and lastly, at the personal level, it would depend on the ways in which the organization managed the employees' needs for social relations and self-development (Arbejdsministeriet, 1971: 69–74).

Providing answers to what at that time was regarded as the increasingly important question of how to most suitably tackle human relations and well-being, in order to enhance productivity and technological innovation, proved to be an exceedingly difficult task for the cooperation committees. In the face of perceived increasing international competition, a new agreement was made in 1970 between the employers and the unions to extend the functions of the cooperation committees to include the internal organization of the company and management in all its dimensions, so as to improve dialogue on the introduction of new productivity-enhancing technology (*Aftale mellem* . . . , 1970). Yet if systematic dialogue, through the cooperation committees, was seen as essential for unleashing the productive power of technological systems by making the management aware of the needs and potential of the workers, it was also deemed utterly insufficient – at least by the employers. What was needed was a type of individualizing knowledge and technique that would facilitate a manageable correlation between individual aspirations for well-being and job satisfaction on the one hand, and organizational goals of productivity and profit on the other. It is at this point that mental hygiene becomes crucial in the history of labour management in Denmark.

Mental Hygiene at Work

The National Association for Mental Hygiene – which had been established as early as 1938 under the name of the National Association for the Alleviation of Mental Illnesses – came to take an increasing interest in the importance of mental well-being at the workplace for quality assurance and productivity. Whereas the Association had initially focused rather narrowly on the alleviation of mental illness through medical research and the dissemination of information to

improve understanding and minimize the prejudices against mental illness, the change of name in 1947 to the National Association for Mental Hygiene indicated a significant widening of its scope of interest that essentially implied that it could now also target its efforts towards the psychological problems of people who could not be diagnosed as mentally ill (Bonnevie, 1953: 97).

While the expansion of the association's activities primarily involved publishing books, pamphlets and a journal, and the establishment of interdisciplinary teams made up of medical doctors, psychologists and social workers offering counselling and advice on family relations and disputes, the association also started to deal with workplace relations. In 1951, the director of the association, Louis Grandjean, took the increasing importance attributed to the personnel issue in many companies as a sign they had acknowledged 'that in mental hygiene something has to be achieved through an employee policy that can enable the individual employee to achieve the justified self-respect and inner conviction of being a useful member of society that is so significant' (Grandjean, 1951: 74). In fact, the principles of mental hygiene, if appropriately implemented, may even cancel out the class struggle: 'It [mental hygiene] is objectively and neutrally pointing out that a mental hygiene employee policy psychologically creates a healthy atmosphere and economically-improved work efforts' (Grandjean, 1951: 76).

The employers could not, however, expect to reap these benefits for free; they in turn had to agree to provide the workers with the security and the rights obtained through their political work. In fact Helge Kjems, a doctor working for the National Association of Mental Hygiene, argued that it would only be possible to create and maintain a 'social climate' at the workplace, conducive to co-operation and efficient production, if a 'non-authoritarian management form' was adopted (Kjems, 1953: 261). This required the establishment of contact and dialogue between the management and each and every employee. In doing so one would alleviate unreasonable outbursts of anger and emotion, though Kjems emphasized that mental hygiene did not only aim at reducing situations of tension and eliminating conflicts:

> There are so many real oppositional relations and conditions of tension that should not be covered up, but have to be resolved. The adjustment, which mental hygiene is seeking, is an adjustment that may lead to the implicated parties having the widest possible chances to act like mature and grown up people so that childish and neurotic reactions do not distort the relations,

> and that the real oppositional relations are brought forth and dealt with matter-of-factly. (Kjems, 1953: 261)

One should be careful not to exaggerate the influence of the mental hygiene movement on the conceptualization and governing of workplace relations. It is clear that until the 1960s little, if any, practical experimental work was conducted at workplaces under the heading of mental hygiene. Yet in 1963 the Mental Hygienic Research Institute, which had been established that year under the auspices of the association and with a great deal of public attention, launched the hitherto most comprehensive study of well-being (*trivsel*) within Danish workplaces. Well-being, wrote Eggert Petersen, the director of the National Association of Mental Hygiene and responsible for the research project, is an expression of the relationship between the individual's expectations and what he actually receives; it is ' "an emotional condition in the person" that exists as the result of prior experiences but is actually independent of the surroundings' (Petersen, 1970: 20). Petersen emphasized that while there are no universal solutions for creating well-being, there:

> . . . is one thing that is fundamental, namely that the company's social system has a genuine interest in the individual being seen as a human being. . . . How this interest is manifested is less important. The crucial thing is that 'something happens' which has a human aim. (Petersen, 1970: 69)

The study, which ran from 1963 to 1967, comprised a total of 1344 employees and 141 managers at 15 companies in Copenhagen (Petersen, 1984: 142–4). The study was unique in that it was the first time that a systematic survey of workplace relations had been undertaken using interviews. Thus, the survey consisted of employees and managers answering a 'sense of well-being' questionnaire and a biographical questionnaire, qualitative interviews with representatives of company executives, managers and employees in order to describe the social system of the workplace, and data on sick leave and other periods of absence, accidents and production records for each and every employee, the group and the whole company.[5] Between 1967 and 1974, based on the experience gained from this survey, the Mental Hygienic Research Institute conducted some 50 additional surveys in a number of companies and institutions in order to examine and improve the well-being of the employees (Petersen, 1984). Simultaneously, the association launched a series

of nationwide campaigns to promote a better sense of well-being at work.

Apart from the studies conducted under the auspices of the mental hygiene movement, the 1970s saw at least three other studies on job development in more than 20 different companies (Agersnap and Junge-Jensen, 1974; Larsen and Lund, 1978; Teknologisk Institut, 1978). These studies, which focused particularly on experiments with job enhancement, job expansion, self-steering groups and co-operative bodies, were all conducted by trained sociologists and economists specializing in organization and personnel management, with the political support of the relevant employers' and employee associations. They focused primarily on the manufacturing sectors, but also included the transport and financial sectors. It was these experiments on well-being, job satisfaction and job enhancement, carried out both inside and outside the field of mental hygiene during the 1970s, rather than the spectacular but unsuccessful attempt by the Social Democratic Party and the major trade unions to install economic democracy (Højrup, 1989: 46–56), that would make way for the neoliberal transformation a decade later.

Employee Development

Since the late 1980s, Danish workplaces have witnessed the influx of a wide array of HRDM activities including neuro-linguistic programming, coaching, team-building exercises, courses in group dynamics, self-assertion training and conflict resolution techniques. Like the attempts of the 1970s to improve well-being and satisfaction through, for example, job enhancement and increased participation in decision-making, the HRDM techniques all assume that employees take an interest in and freely subject themselves to these techniques, i.e. that they exercise their freedom in a way that can be aligned and correlated with the organizational objectives of enhancing quality and productivity. Yet they differ importantly in that increased worker productivity is sought not only by delegation of responsibilities for the particular work processes and products to individuals and groups of employees, but by urging them to continuously develop themselves. The governing of human relations at work has now come to interact with a set of HRDM techniques informed by the norm of continuous development of each and every worker's personal competencies and skills.

A Normative Good

It is not without a certain irony that one may note that the proliferation of techniques for enhancing job autonomy and responsibilities took place in connection not with the socialist-inspired reforms for economic democracy but, rather, with the emergence of neoliberal political rationalities. While hardly as extreme as that found in the US and the UK, there emerged in Denmark too a widely accepted understanding among employers and trade unions alike of the individual that – under adequately facilitating conditions – was characterized as active, seeking influence, taking up challenges and assuming responsibility not only for him/herself but also for their family, community and workplace.

As with the shaping and deployment of earlier forms of psychological technologies, the Danish labour movement has played an active role in the adoption of HDRM techniques. From the early 1990s, one of the key political objectives of the Danish labour unions has been to promote 'development-at-work'. At its annual congress in 1991, the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions, in an effort to strengthen understanding and the progress of 'development-at-work', defined the latter as

> . . . the work that continuously contributes to a positive development of the individual, the workplace, and the society we are living in. A labour policy for 'development-at-work' comprises the development of the job, product, environment and 'the whole life'. Thereby, it does not represent a state that can be reached, but a target that we will continuously strive towards. (Danish Confederation of Trade Unions, 1991: 3)

In more concrete terms, the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions envisaged that 'development-at-work' would imply that 'the job is neither physically nor mentally debilitating, that the work provides possibilities for utilizing and developing skills and knowledge – and that there is possibility for lifelong continuous education'. Moreover, the 'employees [should] have influence on the work and its future development' (Danish Confederation of Trade Unions, 1991: 18–19). With its strategic emphasis on 'development-at-work', the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions effectively toned down – if not abandoned outright – the struggle for economic democracy:

> It is no use merely to strengthen formal democratic influence with, for example, more representatives on boards of directors. Increased participation in daily decisions and development in the workplace is more likely to make way for

> the present possibilities of influence to be utilized much better. In the longer term, employee development will make way for increased justice and democracy in working life. (Danish Confederation of Trade Unions, 1991: 13–14)

This new understanding was largely shared by the Social Democratic Party who, in the following years, launched a series of labour market reforms in support of the work on employee development. This included the programme for the promotion of a better working life and increased economic growth under the Ministry of Labour that was launched in 1993, the promotion of business and industry programme under the Ministry of Business and Industry targeting the development of small and medium-sized companies, and the research and survey programme 'Development of Human Resources in Working Life' under the Ministry of Research (Lind, 1997: 135). Simultaneously, a number of private initiatives were launched in Danish workplaces under the headings of lifelong learning and development, enhanced flexibility and competencies development (e.g. Rasmussen, 1997).

Employee Development Dialogue

As a simple and, admittedly, somewhat superficial exemplification of the functioning of these devices, it may be worth describing the employee development dialogue (EDD). EDD perhaps became one of the most popular HRDM devices to enter the Danish workplace in the 1990s. A survey from 1999 of 250 public and private companies showed that 90 percent of these conducted individual EDD for all or certain segments of their employees. The survey also showed that 94 percent of managers, 96 percent of white-collar workers and 54 percent of blue-collar workers participated in an individual EDD (Nørgaard and Nüssler, 1999: 4–5).

Defined by one of Denmark's leading HRDM experts as 'a systematic, periodic [i.e. regularly recurring], planned and well-prepared dialogue between an employee and her/his (direct) superior – ideally in a way that the two persons enter the conversation as equal partners' (Larsen et al., 1995), the notion of EDD covers a number of varying management–employee dialogue practices with slightly different objectives, such as assessment, planning, tutoring, self-development, organizational strengthening and goal formulation. Notwithstanding these differences, the functioning of EDD is

characterized by its dialogue form in which employees are supposed not only to participate, but also to engage in a constructive dialogue on the ways in which their competencies may be developed in order to improve not only their own performance, but also that of the organization. Employees are urged – and at times even forced – to accept responsibility for their own development with a view to maintaining and improving the overall performance of the organization (Mogensen, 1999).

For EDD to work as intended, the process depends on confession. It is by undertaking a true assessment of themselves that the employees, together with their superior, produce a map of their future possibilities of development. The use of interviews in which individual employees tell the truth about themselves is not an invention of the 1980s, but has been used extensively in recruitment procedures at least since the 1950s (Anonymous, 1963: 15). Moreover, with the introduction of the personnel management function in major Danish organizations during the 1950s and 1960s, the personnel manager took on the role of listening to the grievances of the individual employees with a view to alleviating workplace conflicts (Anonymous, 1957: 196–7). What is new about EDD is that interviews are used on a regular basis during employment not so much – or at least not only – to improve social relations and well-being, but to gauge the progress and utilization of the developmental potentials of the individual employee. During the dialogue session the superior will present her/his assessment of the employee's efforts in frank but non-judgemental terms. Similarly, the employee is supposed to report his/her views and evaluation not only of the superior's efforts but also any personal ambitions, grievances and frustrations with regard to the employee's colleagues, job tasks, prospects of promotion and possibly even issues outside the sphere of work such as family grievances. In order to facilitate employees' revelations of their innermost desires, it is of fundamental importance that the superior avoids judgemental and hostile remarks, though she or he should not keep quiet during the dialogue session, as this will make the employee insecure. Rather, by showing a genuine concern and interest, by practising active listening, and providing practical suggestions, the superior will help employees to reorganize their perceptions and enable them to develop their competencies (Steen, 2000: 62–8).

Based on the assessment, the manager and the employee will jointly seek to identify any needs and goals necessary in order to

develop the employee's competencies and skills, and to identify the activities (such as course participation or restructuring of job procedures) required to ensure that the goals are achieved. An important role of the EDD is to overcome any barriers to competence development, such as employees refusing to admit or simply being unaware that they lack certain competencies, by making explicit what management expects. It is thus assumed that employees are endowed with the capacity and will to develop themselves and their competencies so that they are able to undertake more challenging tasks at work. Hence the importance attributed to the identification of goals and activities based on a common understanding and agreement; that these are not forced upon the employee by the superior. If the goals and activities are imposed from above, they are more likely than not going to fail (Larsen et al., 1995). The indebtedness of the EDD to psychotherapy seems quite obvious. This is not to say that EDD should be seen as the somewhat vulgar application of pure Freudian psychoanalysis. Rather, it is to recognize the generosity of psychology – offering a set of techniques that has spread to a wider range of institutional settings, including the workplace, providing the opportunity to address a variety of problems couched in terms of individual blockages and potentials for self-realization, competence and personal development.

If psychological technologies have proliferated at Danish workplaces during the last two decades, I do not think one should see this as either a simple diffusion or as a local appropriation of essentially foreign neoliberal management ideologies. As shown in the preceding paragraphs, the notion of self-development at work has been present since at least the late 1960s. Rather, I think it is more fitting to characterize the neoliberal reformation of the 1980s as a transmutation of psychological technologies, which, from that time on, started to take personal development as their key rationality. This rationality is informed by a psychology of individual needs – articulated, for example, by Herzberg and Likert – that assumes work to be a site of self-realization. In contrast to the enhancement of well-being propagated by the mental hygienists and others, which did not regard the worker's identification with his/her particular job as a precondition for job satisfaction, the current push for continuous development of personal competencies and skills assumes that employees are driven by an intrinsic psycho-

logical need for self-realization that may be satisfied, above all else, by accepting more challenges and responsibilities at work.

Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate that 'development-at-work' draws heavily on psychological technologies, which after at least two important recastings in the 1950s and 1980s, have been present in the Danish workplace for almost a century now. It has been argued that these technologies are both individualizing and totalizing in that they address both what is taken to be individual psychological properties and human interactions and relations at work in the attempt to bring these into line with organizational goals of productivity. I have sought to show that these techniques seeking to govern the conduct of employees depended not so much on control and coercion. While the governing of the workplace implied that employees were turned into objects of psychological forms of knowledge and norms, it also depended on employees freely questioning and viewing themselves through these very same forms of knowledge and conducting themselves according to these norms.

In particular, the neoliberal recasting of psychological technologies at work during the 1980s implied that these came to rely above all on self-subjectification: that is, on the workers themselves taking an interest in their job, demanding more influence and more responsibilities, and ultimately demanding the ability to develop themselves at work. Hence, whereas the objectifying and subjectifying practices taking place under the headings of psycho-technics and mental hygiene both assumed that the workers freely subjected themselves, it is only with the HRDM techniques that the ethical work, which the worker conducts on her/himself, becomes the key axis of management. While interviews with workers, for example, had been widely utilized by the mental hygiene movement during the 1960s to survey relations and well-being at the workplace, it is only since the late 1980s that interviews have been used, in for example the EDD, as a means of facilitating workers' own reflections on themselves in terms of personality and development potentialities, and inducing workers to set goals and standards for the development of their personal and technical competencies and skills.

This is certainly not to suggest that the psychological technologies have created docile employees. On the contrary, the very norms of dialogue, participation, influence and personal development have been utilized by employees to contest what they regard as unreasonable conditions at work and to voice demands for more 'genuine' forms of labour empowerment. It is in this sense that the exercise of managerial power through the employees' exercise of freedom is a normalizing but, nonetheless, unpredictable game that creates new modes of protest and, ultimately, new constellations of the government/ethics game.

If it is correct that the psychological technologies at work today seek to govern us as much through our exercise of freedom as through coercion and exploitation, it may be appropriate to highlight the possible dangers inherent in the current strong consensus on the moral good of employee development. This implies not so much or at least not only the use and abuse of the manifold practices that seek to develop the employee's personal and professional competencies, though this is clearly a worthy topic of analysis. What I have tried to show is that employee development, even in its most benign and 'empowering' forms, essentially favours practices of freedom based on a division between those who are able – and willing – to develop themselves and take on increased responsibilities and those who cannot or will not. The latter are, at least in Denmark, objectified as, for example, the 'non-committed' worker (who is either unable or unwilling to acquire the right 'personal' competencies, or unwilling to identify with the company mission and ethics); the 'asocial' worker (incapable of or uninterested in maintaining social networks and functioning in self-managing teams); or the 'irresponsible' worker (refusing responsibility for product quality and customer service, demanding excessive wage rises, etc.). Not only are such individuals unlikely to be successful in their job or career to the point of risking being dismissed, they are also subject to a comprehensive set of authoritarian mechanisms that seek to induce and instruct them in how to manage their freedom appropriately, including compulsory participation in job activation and job training schemes at wages below the standards effective on the normal labour market.

Notes

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1. The historical emergence and role of psychological technologies in the labour market in Denmark show both similarities and important differences from Sweden (Eriksson, 1999) and Norway (Knoff, 1994).

2. This admittedly rather general conception of ethics has obviously caused frustration among those scholars seeking in Foucault's writings a theory of subjectivity, i.e. yet another sociological or philosophical anthropology placing the individual safely within the well-known continuum of the structure–agency dichotomy (e.g. Newton, 1998). Yet these scholars seem to neglect the fact that one of Foucault's main concerns was exactly to propose an analysis that avoided taking as its basis a theoretical (in the sense of universal) conception of subjectivity, whether in the form of the constitutive subject (phenomenology), the subject as structural derivate (structuralist Marxism), or all the in-betweens.

3. While a pertinent task, this article does not undertake an analysis of the manifold forms of employee resistance to or support for the use of the psychological technologies at Danish workplaces. Yet there are indications that the labour movement has exercised considerable influence on the ways in which these technologies were actually deployed (e.g. Lund, 1958; Larsen and Lund, 1978).

4. A legislative proposal in the Danish parliament by the Social Democratic Party in 1924 to introduce enterprise councils (*bedriftsråd*) that gave employees consultative – but not decision-making – influence on matters including company accounting, employee health and welfare, training of apprentices and other issues of importance for the employees, was never adopted (*Forslag til Lov om Bedriftsraad*, 1924).

5. Not unlike the introduction of psycho-technics, the dissemination of mental hygiene principles in the workplace was informed by experiments at military institutions. The person in charge of the well-being study, Eggert Petersen, was thus drawing on his experiences of a comprehensive 'sociological and social psychological' survey undertaken in 1961 of the mental well-being at 28 Danish naval bases, a survey that would subsequently earn him a doctorate (Petersen, 1967).

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