LABOUR MIGRATION IN THE WESTERN SIBERIAN NORTH: LIVES AND SOCIAL SPACES OF LONG-DISTANCE COMMUTE WORKERS

A Qualitative Empirical Account

Who are the people behind the extraction processes of crude oil and natural gas in the Russian Federation? This research project aims at ethnographic field research in natural resource extraction contexts, with a focus on the complex interrelation of natural resource extraction, power structures and social spatial particularities in northwestern Siberia, where the highest amount of oil and gas reserves of the world are located. The aim of this research project is to map the spatial and temporal dimensions of the lives of Long-Distance Commuter(s) and Long-distance Commute Work (LDC) regardless of where it takes place in the world. The research focuses on LDC and their perspectives on work, family life and recreation. LDC are constantly on the move, travelling back and forth. They have a dual’s position in the work context, which, in turn, has a social dimension resulting from an individual’s position in the social structural hierarchies. This basic theoretical contextualisation may apply to LDC in various parts of the world.

The LDC known in Russia as Fjodrophobe(s) have become an increasingly important work force due to the fast industrialisation and extraction projects that are rapidly reshaping the lives of people in rural areas. Fjodrophobe(s) are perceived as people who live a double life, a life at home and a life ON DUTY. Workers are drawn into different social settings with regular subordination to the regimes in closed LDC-camps. Whilst subordinated to company-regimes in closed LDC-camps, LDC have a life at home, characterised by a cyclic presence at and absence from home, subordinated to strict company-regimes in closed work camps, and long journeys to and from work sites.

The journey of LDCs from northwestern Russia to the industrial centres of the region is rapid and dangerous. It is an extreme example of modernity, where the north is no longer “unknown” territory. It is the result of industrialisation through e.g. social practice that shapes community life and perspectives of a region. Regular absence of family members, such as mothers, fathers, and other family members, leads to a situation where the wife is predominately responsible for family life during the LDC’s absence. Women often travel alone or accompanied by their children. Housing-standards and costs for public transport and have also provoked fundamental changes in working conditions. Workers who were previously provided with flight tickets by employers may nowadays be forced to fund their own journeys and therefore choose the train. A new way to fund Movement to work is to take trains three days by train (compared to four busses by example) which reduces costs, but increases recreation time. Workers often take a train to work and back, and some have children. Recreation period is high and connected to domestic responsibilities, social life, or recreation, health problems, lack of employment etc.

Understanding the coping strategies, motivation for and resistance toward LDC forms a crucial basis for perspectivess on labour potentials in a new social order demanding for highly skilled workers in economics. Some LDC describe their perspective on work potential as an added value of family and children who earn money for the transfer of their remains. In this way, mobility and the impacts of the working conditions are also connected to raising social capital within the community.

Regional and multi-sited field-work

HOME

A life characterized by alternating presence and absence of a family member may challenge traditional gender role norms, for instance, hierarchical and family duties can be stratified from the worker’s responsibility to the household, when he is back home for a month. Father-child relationships may be intensified. The father is held responsible for family affairs during household’s absence. Women from family and society may provide space to the worker’s child enough to bring a model of different social situation that has a social dimension resulting from an individual’s position in the social structural hierarchies. This basic theoretical contextualisation may apply to LDC in various parts of the world.

JOURNEY

Journey has a social dimension resulting from a global mobility pattern in the northwestern region, which is very demanding and sometimes also a secret “other” life. The journey is often a part of the worker’s job. Mobility has become institutionalized through e.g. vocational training, schools preparing for LDC in the hydrocarbon sector. At the same time, those circumstances may foster social relationships often described as being as propitious as family relations. It may also go some decades old, yet the journey is strictly prohibited, although often illegally consumed. The northern climate also influences the association between the man and his job. Men in worker-camps substantially outnumber women. Gender and jobs and duties are characterised by vertical and horizontal gender division. Family and community members are divided in roles that are perceived as gender-specific. The man’s role is described as the provider of the family, the woman’s role is described as the provider of the home.

ON DUTY

Working according to the rules and climate of the region is the reality around the polar circle, where the harsh climate around the polar circle is the main reason for the strong dominance of women in the family. In the north: Novyj Urengoj (intra-regional LDC); In the central Russia: Republic of Chuvashia and Republic of Mari El (2007, 2008); In the south: Republic of Bashkortostan and Republic of Tatarstan (2009-2010).

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SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

• Distance becomes ‘normal’ / LDC from central parts of Russia have in corporated the ‘north’ as another part of the temporal and geographical distance into their lived social space. This seems to be a new context for the mobility and transport systems that have only been institutionalised through e.g. vocational training. It means that institutionalising is a process that is new.

• The development of coping strategies, of ideas and status to live a way of life is not only a personal matter. Agency reflects the meaning of institutionalised social potentials such as family, friendship, club membership, etc. These social potentials have turned into social practices that shape community life and perspectives of a region. Regular absence of family members is not regarded as deviant. Mobile livelihood has been institutionalised through e.g. vocational training, schools preparing for LDC in the hydrocarbon sector.

• The spatial and shape of changing and degrading working conditions through the restructuring and rationalisation processes of the steel hydrocarbon sector among companies. Correspondingly, restructuring systems have had an impact on employees of smaller and middle-size companies since labour rights are more easily damaged.

• LDC is not necessarily perceived as deviant. Difficulties to raise children, hazardous working conditions, and unsatisfying transport facilities and housing conditions are also connected to raising social capital within the community.

• The journey has a social dimension resulting from a global mobility pattern in the northwestern region, which is very demanding and sometimes also a secret “other” life. The journey is often a part of the worker’s job. Mobility has become institutionalized through e.g. vocational training, schools preparing for LDC in the hydrocarbon sector. At the same time, those circumstances may foster social relationships often described as being as propitious as family relations. It may also go some decades old, yet the journey is strictly prohibited, although often illegally consumed. The northern climate also influences the association between the man and his job. Men in worker-camps substantially outnumber women. Gender and jobs and duties are characterised by vertical and horizontal gender division. Family and community members are divided in roles that are perceived as gender-specific. The man’s role is described as the provider of the family, the woman’s role is described as the provider of the home.