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Trimming the social body. An analysis of Lean management among family counsellors in a Danish municipality

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyse through ethnographic fieldwork the social and cultural context and (unintended) consequences of introducing a management concept from the private sector (LEAN) into the public sector. Lean is seen in a cultural context, and the paper argues that the persuasiveness of Lean depends on building a metaphorical connection between organisational aims and individual experiences and bodily ideals. Lean purports to be a win-win game and a way to eliminating 'waste' through worker participation, empowerment and enthusiasm. The research points to the contrary. Lean was met with scepticism and was seen by the social workers as a waste of time.

It is a crisp blue April morning. Together with a dozen social workers I am participating in a workshop that introduces us to 'Lean', a management concept originating in the private sector that the municipality has decided to try out in order to raise efficiency and improve work satisfaction. Vibeke, who is a family counsellor and locally appointed lean consultant introduces us to the key concepts like 'waste', 'customer value', 'pull-based production principles' and, last but not least, 'kaizen', which is Japanese for 'change for the better' and which refers to 'continuous improvement' created by the employees. She briefly recounts the story of how the Lean concept could be traced back to Japan. Her 20-minute presentation is followed by a short movie, *Coffee-kaizen*, made by Implement, the consultancy hired to help introduce Lean in the municipality. In 7 minutes the movie tells the story of a young man who is making coffee for an invited friend. The movie painstakingly takes us through all the stages of the brewing process. Time and resources are wasted: Production tools and raw materials (coffee, filters, funnel, thermos etc.) are

hard to find in different drawers and cupboards far away from 'the production apparatus' (i.e., the coffee machine). The hapless coffee maker, it turns out, hasn't got adequate equipment, measures the wrong dose and inevitably spills the coffee powder. We follow him during the process and notes that as soon as the coffee machine starts brewing he is just standing there fiddling with his mobile and doing nothing while huge amounts of brown liquid slurps through the coffee machine. Waste is obvious and absurdity absolute when his friend arrives — and it turns out that he doesn't want coffee.

We were then divided into small groups and invited to identify 'waste' and suggest improvements. Then followed the other half of the movie— Now production has been reorganised according to Lean principles: Coffee powder and funnel are placed close to the coffee machine, whereby excess movements have been eliminated; the coffee powder is measured with a measuring spoon and the production process has become 'pull-based' as it becomes apparent through a telephone call with the friend that demand for coffee is low (since the friend doesn't want it)— so only one cup is made. As the coffee is brewing our main character is not standing idle, but spends his time doing a little cleaning and washing up¹— We are all laughing along the way, but the consultants in the movie are serious, because they are illustrating what according to Lean philosophy is known as: 'the seven deadly wastes'.

Lean describes a series of management tools to streamline and optimize production. Originating in the Japanese car industry it has spread across the globe and is now used in both manufacturing and service in private and public sector organisations. In this paper I describe what happened when Lean was introduced among family counsellors. Over a two year period I followed a lean project in the social services¹. Helle², who is head of the group of family counsellors among whom my fieldwork took place, explained the background of introducing Lean:

The legal demands and the demands put to us from the municipality have increased. The family counsellors are under a very high pressure to live up to the quality measures in the administrative work, and the increased pressure creates dissatisfied

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSMSmeyri7o>

and frustrated customers. We are very aware that lean should not be used as a resource-tool, but only to improve the working climate of the employees.

Generally lean is presented by managers and consultants as a straightforward solution – a win-win game: By organizing working procedures a little smarter, you can avoid doing things twice, make fewer mistakes, increase the flow of casefiles, save money on the municipal budgets — and have more time to talk to the citizens or customers.

My research indicates that Lean did not work according to intentions — Many social workers were sceptical, and their involvement in the lean process was characterized by a mixture of reluctance and bad conscience. But why didn't the family counsellors involve themselves more enthusiastically in a project, which called for their participation in getting rid of 'waste'?

To one of the consultants of *Implement*, the private consultancy commissioned to head the lean project, the answer was simple: 'If the lean project fails it is because of bad management. Full stop!' (Kjærgaard, 2008b: 63). This explanation of lack of success corresponds to the explanation given by other lean consultants and -books. As I will argue in this article, however, I don't think the project's failings should only be attributed to inadequate leadership or insufficient knowledge about lean on the social workers' part. My material suggests that the lack of enthusiasm was connected first to a suspicion about the view of work life inherent in Lean, and second to the fact that— somewhat paradoxically— to many of the family counsellors Lean turned out to be a waste of time. I argue that in order to understand Lean and its strong contemporary appeal it is necessary to look beyond the organisation. Taking my clue from anthropological theories on symbol and ritual, which point out how the body is the 'natural symbol' of society *par excellence*, I explain how Lean achieves its ideological force by linking ideas of organisational efficiency to particular Western ideals of the individual human body. In other words, in order to understand how Lean management works in a broader social sense and cultural context, it is necessary to look closely at the language and metaphors by which Lean is envisioned and propagated. This language makes people look at their social reality in a way that tend to suppress and marginalise certain experiences and delegitimize particular viewpoints and forms of critique. As stated above, I suggest a strategy of careful listening

to take seriously the full range of experiences and the reservations of the social workers rather than brushing them aside as lack of knowledge or commitment.

Background: Three reforms and the ‘Hammer of Thor

‘My job starts with a “concern” [bekymring]’, says Bente who has been working as a family counsellor for 15 years. The family counsellor has to react to information from school- or kindergarten teachers, neighbours and others who are concerned about a child’s well-being. According to the law the municipal authority must react to such appeals (henvendelser) by investigation the situation of the child. These so-called §50 investigations constitutes an important part of work of the family counsellor. The purpose of such investigations is to establish the grounds for deciding whether a child needs intervention from the authorities to solve the problem.

In 2006, the same year as the municipal budgets saw severe cuts, the *Placement Reform (Anbringelsesreformen)* was launched. Under this reform the §50 investigation was amplified. Consequently, the investigation should no longer just point out problems but also suggest means of resolving them by trying to identify the resources within the child’s family and personal network. When the family counsellor has finished this analysis, an appropriate intervention is decided. This ‘Plan for Action’ (*handleplan*) might involve some form of minor social provisions (dagforanstaltninger), or, in more serious cases, residential placements. As a result of the Placement Reform the family counsellors now has to make ‘action plans’ not only in the case of residential placements (as was previously the case), but in every case. The reform also implied an extended obligation to interview children. As a family counsellor explained: ‘If I am concerned about little Josephine, I have to interview not just her but all the children in her family’ (Claus). All social workers agreed that the intentions behind the reform were good, but that it increased their workload.

The Placement Reform is fine and commendable. The problem is that things take time. Our work has changed and we must write more than before- ‘action plans’ and children’s interviews...– so much more paperwork. And on top of that we see political demands that we must journalize before two weeks and carry out the §50 investigation within four months. To do all that we have to think in new ways, and

that's where Lean comes in. (Vibeke, family counsellor and internal Lean consultant).

Lean was introduced in the social services department right after the municipal reform (*Strukturreformen*) was launched in January 2007. It happened at a moment when municipal budgets were strained as a consequence of a bill passed by the Finance minister Thor Pedersen in 2006. The bill - dubbed 'the Hammer of Thor' referring to Norse Mythology by the social workers — meant that each municipality had to pay back double of their individual budget deficit to the state if all the municipalities taken together were not able to keep within the budgetary frameworks put by the government. As a consequence, the city council of Aarhus decided on a budget agreement, which implied cutting municipal spending by 410 million D.kr. of which 33 million were cuts in the area of social work. This led to protests among social workers, culminating in stoppage and a demonstration in front of the Municipality. The next day the family counsellors resumed their work, but sent out a press release:

Our means to carry out our work are undercut and the politicians are not reducing their demands on our work performance. This puts us in an impossible situation. It will lead to actual violations of the law, inability to meet the demands in case work and serious reduction in the quality of the interventions (den socialpædagogiske indsats) and, last but not least an impaired work environment with an increasing number of sick leaves.

Existing statistics on sick leave indicated that the pressure in the municipal's department of social services was already very high. In 2007 when the Lean project was launched the aim of the corporate plan of 2007 was to bring the average amount of sick leave days down to 17,5 days per year (*Virksomhedsplanen, 2008-2009: 25*). The book *God Lean Ledelse* (2005, eng. Good Lean Management), which was used to prepare the social workers who were to become local lean coordinators, acknowledge the general work pressure in the public sector: 'The task can no longer be solved by general cuts. The surplus fat has already been removed. In many places [it has been removed] to an extent resulting in high workloads and stress. New means are necessary, and this is where we can be inspired by our best colleagues in the manufacturing industry' (Eriksen et al.,

2005: 12). The book then puts Lean forward as an ‘extremely efficient tool to remove stress-inducing factors and thereby stress among employees [...] [R]esults are overwhelming counting double-digit increases in productivity, the time spent on casework is dramatically reduced, and this is combined with reduction in stress, improved customer service and increased job satisfaction in the organisation’ (Eriksen et al., 2005: 6-7). Great things were expected to come from Lean, not only locally, but also on a national level. Thus Lean was one of the instruments in the Danish government’s Quality Reform (*Kvalitetsreformen*) launched in 2007 to develop ‘a modern, dynamic public service full of quality’ (Regeringen, 2007: 14). The reform points to Lean as a tool to help improve the psycho-social work environment and increase efficiency at the same time (Regeringen, 2007: 81).

Lean og New Public Management

Lean is a corollary to *New Public Management*. Lean appears in both the Structure Reform and the Quality Reform, which are again rooted in the economic agendas of OECD and the political aims of the European Union and which further points to a common understanding of ‘globalization’ and what it takes to survive and thrive on the global market place (Ørberg, 2008). Behind these reforms is the government’s vision that Denmark must be a leading ‘knowledge society’ in a globalised world, which again echoes statements in the Lisbon Treaty from 2000 that by 2015 EU should be: ‘...the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world’ (Presidency Conclusions, 2000). The purpose of the Danish public sector is viewed in this perspective: ‘A well-developed public sector supports both a strong competitive power and a strong cohesive power’ (Regeringen, 2008: 8). Lean, then, seems to be a logical choice of ‘tool’ for a government that wishes to reform and streamline public services inspired by the market and the private sector.

As mentioned above Lean is a means to rationalise production that originated in the Japanese Car industry in the 1960’s as the so-called *Toyota Production System* (Ohno 1988). Lean is a series of tools to involve employees in streamlining production processes. In the words of lean pioneers Womack and Jones (2003: 10), Lean can be summarized in five principles: ‘Precisely specify *value* by specific product, identify the

value stream of each product, make *value flow* without interruption, let the customer *pull* value from the producer, and pursue *perfection*'. The overarching intention is to eliminate waste (jap. *Muda*) defined as the processes and elements that do *not* create value for the customer. *Muda* can take many shapes: In a manufacturing company like Toyota it could be capital tied up in large stock, scrap production *etc.* In service and administration, the notion of waste is more limited. Above all it is *waste of time*, i.e., the employees spend their time on things that do not add value to the product or the service (Eriksen et al., 2005: 31).

In 2007 The Lean-project *Effectiveness Together* (da. *Effektivisering i Fællesskab*) was initiated by a network of high standing civil servants, politicians and officers of local government, who wanted to see how lean worked in public organizations, or, as stated in the project advertisement:

'Lean enables the employee and the leader to put change and development on the agenda. At the same time lean can be the tool to ensure efficiency, well-being and job-satisfaction in the municipal work place [...] Lean can be part of the answer to the great challenges facing the municipalities in the wake of the structural and quality reforms'

Through seminars, lean introduction meetings -and exercises the employees were made familiar with lean tools and the concepts of 'value stream', 'the five deadly wastes', 'kaizen' *et cetera*. At the start of my investigation the family counsellors had all participated in introductory meetings; most had taken part in a full day seminar and for three months they had taken part in regular *Kaizen*-meetings. *Kaizen* is Japanese for 'improvement' and refers to the 'continuous improvement' of the workers, which is a key element in the lean process. Every two weeks the social workers would assemble for a 20-minute *Kaizen* meeting to come up with 'suggestions for improvement' ('forbedringsforslag'), which should subsequently be implemented.

Kaizen: Stand-up Meetings and 'continuous improvement'

One Tuesday morning in November 2007 I was attending my first Kaizen-meeting at the Social Centre where I did my fieldwork. For the past weeks I had attended the Lean

introduction (see above), talked to the social workers about their work, participated in team meetings and meetings with clients and got an impression of the working days of the family counsellors. As it is early in the morning the municipal office is not yet open to the public. I knock on the door, and Birgitte, the receptionist, lets me in. As we walk down the corridor Bodil, a family counsellor joins us: ‘are you also joining the “Falun Gong”- rally?’ Together we reach the *Kaizen*-board, which is placed conspicuously in the central corridor just opposite the waiting area.

The *Kaizen*-board is the most visible sign of the Lean process. It is here that the social workers’ suggestions to improve their routines and workflow are registered. At the centre of the white, laminated board are four squares organised along two axes [see figure 1]. The vertical axis represents the potential effect of the ‘improvement initiative’ (*forbedringsinitiativet*). The other- horizontal- states the potential timeframe of the initiative, i.e., it specifies whether the initiative can be realised immediately or whether it requires more time. The top right corner is green— This is the place for suggestions with a presumed high effect that can be carried through straight away— what the consultants called ‘the low-hanging fruits’ or just ‘quick hits’ as was the name on the board. To the left of the tri-coloured square is the ‘idea box’ (*idékassen*) [see figure 2]. This is where new suggestions for improvement are put. To the right and on the other side of the square is the ‘improvement wheel’ (*forbedringshjulet*) [see figure 3] containing the suggestions that have already been dealt with and classified at previous meetings. Here suggestions have been turned into numbers on yellow post-it notes. Camilla who is a social worker and the local project coordinator of the Lean initiative explains: ‘According to the Lean-philosophy one is supposed to meet every day- but for us it would be a waste of time, so we are content with having a *kaizen* meeting once every fortnight.’

In a few minutes the recess in front of the *Kaizen* board fills up with family counsellors and office staff: three men and the rest women between 25-60 years old. The idea behind the *Kaizen*-meeting is, Camilla explains to me, that it should be brief and to the point: to maintain energy and efficiency, the participants should keep standing, and the meeting is not supposed to last more than 20 minutes. At exactly 8.40am Camilla opens the meeting with the question: ‘Who would like to be in charge of the board (*tavlefører*) today?’ The

request keeps hanging in the air for ten seconds or more while Camilla runs her eye over the group. Finally, Marianne volunteers. She starts by addressing the suggestions in the 'ideabox'. By joint effort ideas are then classified and placed at the appropriate coloured centre-squares, and people hesitantly join the working groups responsible for carrying out the particular suggestions. Subsequently, earlier initiatives — now represented by the post-it notes— are reviewed to find out what has been accomplished since last time.

After two work-groups have been appointed that match the two suggestions - one about making a brochure on the § 50-investigation for the users and another about creating a standard letter to be used when the family counsellors summon the parties in a case for a so-called network-meetings ['netværksmøder']— Bente, who is an experienced family counsellor proposes to make Fridays a half day off by extending the working hours on two other weekdays. Her suggestion is met with mixed responses: 'This is all well and good, but we have to argue that it improves service and makes a difference to the customer. Does it imply less waste and a better use of resources?' Camilla comments. 'But I think it is an advantage to the customer that we extend opening hours a bit in the afternoon,' Bente replies. Camilla is not convinced, however: 'I don't think it is a good selling point when we have to fill new positions that we have two long days...'. Susanne backs her up. 'I applied for the job at the municipality because of the working hours. I have small children, and it is crucial for me that I can pick them up early from day-care.' the discussion is put to rest by an agreement to appoint a committee to follow up and investigate further into the matter.

At exactly 9am the meeting is over and people depart and head to their offices. I ask Marianne who was in charge of the board, why there are no post it notes in the square marked out for 'completed initiatives' ['gennemførte tiltag']. A smile flickers across her face as she responds: 'It must be a mistake. Actually, we have just been given a new copying machine— But I think that is the only suggestion that has so far been effectuated.'

A general picture when I talked to the counsellors was that they thought the ideas were fine, but that they did not have the time to realise them. Suggestions thus kept accumulating and the Lean-board, which was centrally placed in the corridor to motivate employees and keep them to the task, became a source of bad conscience and a daily

reminder of collective passivity and personal inadequacy. 'We look down when we pass it' as Bente once told me when the Lean project had been going for 4 months.

Among other things the meeting illustrated that concepts like 'waste' and 'customer' were far from unambiguous and objective but contested and open for negotiation. When I started fieldwork in 2007 and the Lean campaign had just been launched it was surrounded by an air of hope and optimism. Because the project received attention from politicians and management it was hoped that by framing suggestions under the Lean initiative real positive change and improvement could be created. As the head of department, Hanne, said when I first met her: 'Lean has broken a tradition of top-down management within the municipality. Suggestions from employees are now taken seriously. Top management just haven't found out yet!'

A counsellor similarly recounted her experiences with the so-called *Blitz-Kaizen* that had been carried through at two Social Centres. The point of Blitz-kaizen was that it was a one-day event, where employees collectively visualized and mapped their work-process and subsequently came up with suggestions for improvement, which were then implemented immediately afterwards. Having the whole work process (or 'value-flow' in Lean parlance) mapped in this way had been 'a revelation', she told me. Others emphasised the simplification and harmonization of written forms and templates as examples of the positive outcomes of the Lean process.³ But these stories were few and far between, and as time passed the counsellors would generally take an increasingly reserved and critical stance towards the project.

Staunch consultants and busy counsellors

Lean proponents and consultants tend to view lean as a method or set of 'tools' (*værktøjer*), which can be taken out of their initial context and used to great beneficial effect in circumstances that are quite different from the Japanese car industry. One of the lean consultants of the municipal central organization indeed saw the cultural distance as an advantage: 'The point is, actually, that we shouldn't adapt. We shall do it exactly as they do in Japan. I believe that such a chock effect can create a lot of good.'

Jørgen Kjærgaard, a partner in the consultancy *Implement*, who was charge of the training, counselling and supervising the municipality's lean project, writes:

metaphorically speaking one might say that the exquisite and elaborate aesthetics that we recognise from the Japanese landscape art, gift-wrapping, presentation of food etc. should be transferred to the management of work processes applying the lean tools to get the full returns. Therefore, we are sceptical when it comes to a slack (*løsagtig*) use of the lean concept (Kjærgaard, 2008: 9).

According to the external lean consultants involved in the project it was important to fully acknowledge that it takes time and requires continuous and sustained effort to establish a 'lean culture' (Sønderby et al., 2008). So, to get an opportunity to see how the lean culture spread and worked, I followed the process extensively for two years.

When I returned to the social centre a year after my initial month of fieldwork the picture was the same: The principled and enthusiastic programmes and presentations from the Lean consultants were met with pragmatism and quiet recalcitrance. Signe who is a counsellor as well as local lean project coordinator, told me about the *Kaizen* meeting:

I have told my colleagues up here that they are allowed to sit down. You saw it over among the family counsellors, they sat in the sofas, and according to lean principles they are not supposed to do that. To begin with we had to do like we were told: "You have to keep standing when attending a Kaizen-meeting. No leaning back, and 'time will pass'- attitudes". But this becomes strained and artificial, and people resist it..

The enthusiasm and 'ownership' which *Implement* and the municipal consultant presupposed and hoped for, were hard to spot:

To begin with the spirit was high. We had to learn to be in charge of the Kaizen-meeting, and then it grinded to a halt, and there were no good ideas. Then we stood and looked foolishly at each other and then it stopped, and now it is like...people look out their office doors, and: "Oh, is there a Kaizen meeting", and the standard comment is: "I simply haven't seen that" (Rikke, counsellor)

But I think nine out of ten think: "we have to attend that Kaizen-meeting now. No, that little yellow post-it that was put on- Oh God I was in that group". And you heard, how it is— then someone has left, then someone is on maternity leave... In the beginning I actually took part in many of those working groups, and now I have stopped, because I risk ending up with everything on my plate (Susan, counsellor).

Well, you have attended the lean meetings out there, and you don't see a group of employees where enthusiasm is burning through, do you? Well, you don't. You see people who come dawdling, and: "Well, is it today we have a Kaizen meeting. Urrgh, I thought it was next week". You don't see an engaged group of people who say: Yes, I want to do it!— that's just a fact (Birgitte, family counsellor).

But why is it that so few suggestions have been realised? Why don't the family counsellors commit themselves more wholeheartedly to a project that invites and depends on their active contribution; a project whose key idea was that they themselves should be in the driver's seat and suggest 'improvement initiatives' and eliminate 'waste' and create quality, job-satisfaction, and 'Effectiveness together'?

In the books that were offered as background material to the counsellors it was recognised that people would tend to go on the defensive when Lean was introduced in service and administration. Such reservations were explained by the fact that leaders and managers in the public sector often had a professional background: The doctor in treating illnesses, the counsellor in case work. The point was, however, to be inspired by industry, where the production manager will rarely be an expert on the thing produced, but often an expert of how to organize production to the optimum (Eriksen et al., 2005: 18). In another book two consultants, Ahrengot og Christiansen, emphasised that, similar to any other trimming exercise for Lean to become 'a culture' a sustained, disciplined effort was required: '...there is no miracle cure, that will make the *muda-fat* wither away magically to make everybody ready for the bathing season. Lean takes a long-term change of lifestyle, which has proven to lead to increased profits and happier customers. And, last, but not least: much higher job satisfaction among employees' (Ahrengot & Christiansen, 2006: 19).

Such accounts imply that the lack of success of the lean project must be attributed to the fact that leaders, counsellors or consultants lack the required knowledge and determination. My material suggests, however, that the waning support of the employees might be connected to a scepticism towards the view of human nature and work life implicit in Lean, i.e., a buried set of assumptions, which alienated the counsellors and which many of them saw as a threat to their professionalism. The starting point of my enquiry is that we have to take seriously the counsellors experiences, practices and reasons to be able to get an adequate understanding of how lean works.

Lean and stress

Over the past years a large number of books about Lean has been published in Denmark. Titles like: *Lean med hjertet* [Lean with the Heart] (Jensen & Greve 2007), *Langsigtet Lean* [Long term Lean] (Nørgaard et al., 2009) og *God Lean ledelse* [Good Lean Management] (Eriksen et al., 2005) all suggest that Lean is a management approach that has a positive impact on life in the organisation. It is striking that almost all books published about lean in Denmark are programmatic rather than analytical⁴— practical user manuals rather than critical enquiries. Thus, their starting premise is that Lean is a great way to create healthy and vigorous organisations characterized by both greater efficiency and higher levels of job satisfaction. Even a book carrying the title: *Lean uden Grænser* [Lean without Limits?]⁵— a title which might suggest critical exploration— loses its analytical distance and becomes part of what it is supposed to investigate as it is revealed in the preface to the book which states without irony: ‘Together we have attempted to base the textbook on Lean principles. Publication has been accomplished on time and with a convincing flow and not too much *muda* (=waste). It has been instructive to co-author a book which has been created in record-time without sacrificing the level of ambition’ (Arlbjørn, 2008: 12). Another example is the title of a research project *Lean uden stress* [Lean without Stress], thus implying *a priori* that Lean *can* be implemented without stress. Lean is primarily to be understood as a strategy for rationalizing production, but with one notable exception these books fail to address all the international debates and discussions about the impact of Lean on the work environment. They seem to automatically assume that: ‘In a lean-environment, employees have a higher degree of

job-satisfaction' (Tapping et al., 2005: 15) or, as Lean pioneer James Womack expresses it: 'The world becomes a different and much better place' (Womack et al., 1990: 270).

If we want to know, however, how Lean works in a broader context and longer perspective, we should not only place our confidence in the idealised descriptions and assurances of its positive consequences from people who have a vested interest in pushing the Lean agenda. If we turn our glances towards Japan, where Lean originated and has worked for the longest, a gloomier picture emerges. Next to South Korea Japan is the country in the world where people work the longest (Green 1999: 24)– indeed, in Japan there is a concept- *karoshi* – to describe dying from overwork (see Landsbergis, 1999: 125).

Many organization scholars and sociologists have pointed out how Lean leads to increased work pressure, because pauses tend to be defined as 'waste' (Harrison, 1994; Conti et al., 2006; Landsbergis, 1999; Mehri, 2005; Moody, 1997; Stephenson, 1994). According to this research the permanent hunt for productivity gains in an eternal process of rationalization and efficiency means that vital porosity or breathing spaces in the course of the workday are likely to be eliminated. Thus Pruijt emphasises how Taichi Ohno's⁵ celebrated Toyota Production System (the direct source of inspiration for Lean) involve what some critics have called the 'Oh! No! –method', whereby the work norm is put at 101-120 per cent. This involves a steady intensification of work and makes working overtime a structural requirement. Through *kaizen* this overtime is reduced, whereupon management intensifies work pressure and sets new 'ambitious' goals (Pruijt, 2000: 447). Other reports confirm this picture when they emphasise that workers on Leaned factories reports that work is too fast, too heavy, or that they haven't got enough time to do it properly (Lewchuk and Robertson, 1996). According to these critics, Lean does not lead to job-satisfaction and autonomy. On the contrary, the Lean logic with its infinite quest towards optimization is likely to lead to increased workloads (Landsbergis 1999: 108; Williams et al. 1992: 342-243, Barker, 1998) or, simply 'management by stress' (Bradley et al., 2000: 44).

It is not an *a priori* given that Lean leads to job satisfaction and release of new energy among employees— just as it is not self-evident that the initiatives that are carried

through under the Lean project will lead to increased levels of stress. These are empirical questions. As the process went on, however, the Lean project I investigated was marked by reservation and quiet defiance rather than enthusiasm and energy, and the process created frustration and worries with many counsellors. Often Lean is introduced as a 'mentality' - or 'culture change' or 'a philosophy' (see above)— But what kind of 'culture' is Lean? What new understandings of work-roles and work life does Lean imply?

Go-getters and grumblers

In a report Jørgen Kjærgaard, one of the consultants involved in *Effectiveness Together*, writes about two different views on the public sector: First a 'defensive' one from whose perspective the public sector has seen 'declining levels of service and spending cuts'. Secondly another 'confident' view, where:

the factors mentioned above are challenges to be managed by devising a strategy, where one chooses how one will take up the challenges by focusing on how the organisation might contribute in close collaboration with stakeholders. A bit simplified the culture defined by a defensive approach will be marked by resignation and negativity, while the culture with a confident approach will see strength and organisational self-assurance. [This is how Lean] strengthens positive thinking and energy in the organisation (Kjærgaard, 2008: 8-9).

Kjærgaard recognizes that the public sector is under pressure, but he argues that one can make a choice between either focusing on problems and protest against working conditions or instead try to take up the challenge deal with the situation proactively and in a positive manner. Just as 'improvements' become synonymous with 'rationalisations', 'problems' are redefined as 'challenges'. When one looks at the world with a Lean focus one should not complain over cutbacks, but instead deal 'constructively' with the situation and find solutions within the existing budgetary frameworks. The premise is that through involving employees in rationalisations it is possible to start an unending process of improvement and deliver more and better service without spending more money.

It is assumed that an optimization of the use of resources in production is concurrent with the development of good working conditions. Lean is presented as a method based on simple tools, which enable one to reach incontestable beneficial ends. In the introduction to their book *Lean Thinking*, James Womack and Daniel Jones writes: 'In the pages ahead we will explain in detail what to do and why. Your job, therefore, is simple: just do it!' (Womack & Jones 2003: 12) or, as a Danish consultant puts it: 'Kaizen is about striving for continuous improvement- at the organizational and personal level' (Eriksen et al., 2005: 79).

But reality is rarely that simple. As the example from the morning assembly where employees discussed whether one should prolong the working day in exchange for a shortening of Friday workhours showed, defining 'waste' is not a straightforward matter, and in a public system it is not easy to decide who the 'customer' is (Sønderby, 2008: 21-25). By the same token it quickly becomes difficult to decide what 'efficiency' is, because it depends on the time horizon and how the problem is posed. The argument in favour of extending opening hours on weekdays and getting Friday afternoons off was that it would increase the possibilities of people who had a regular work-week to get in touch with the Social Centre after they got off from work. But if, as others maintained, it was indeed the relatively short working days that attracted badly needed manpower to the social centre, then deciding what should be counted as 'an improvement' was not a simple matter. Along similar lines it has been pointed out by critics that what is regarded as 'efficiency' and thus improvement in Lean often does not take into account what economists call 'externalities', i.e., the costs inflicted on a third party (Green, 1999: 24).⁶ In the Lean language this complexity is absent, and its messages come across matter-of-fact and obvious. —

Lean's basic idea is intuitively appealing and common sense: we should organize production more effectively and expediently to avoid 'waste'. We shall all contribute to making sure that resources are devoted to the core service. But *common sense* is, as anthropologists never fail to point out, neither specifically 'common' nor very 'sensible' when looked upon in a larger perspective and taken under closer scrutiny (Herzfeld, 2001: 1). When we say of someone that they show common sense it suggests that they

use their experience prudently to solve problems effectively. As the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz once emphasised, one of the most characteristic traits of 'common sense' is that it denies its own cultural contingency claiming instead that it derives directly from experience. But this is an illusion. Like nuclear physics or the Koran, common sense claims to get to the core of things (Geertz, 1983: 75-77). And we are unconsciously disposed to accepting common sense, because, as Pierre Bourdieu once said, common sense is 'notions or theses *with* which people argue, but *over* which they do not argue' (Bourdieu, 2004: 8). But this is of course exactly why it is particularly important to discuss the assumptions behind Lean, i.e., to view it in a larger social and cultural context, and to examine the language through which it is rendered plausible and convincing.

The political and ideological field can be understood as a continuous struggle to establish common sense, i.e., to define the meaning of certain keywords and concepts (Shore & Wright, 2000). Within the context of Lean words like 'waste', 'quality', 'value', 'positive thinking', and 'improvement initiative' get associated with spending cuts and streamlining of production. What happens is a semantic conquest and laying down of a particular meaning of those positive words, which subsequently makes it near impossible for people to express their reservations about the decisions and initiatives taken by management or 'the community of colleagues'— for who can oppose 'waste' or be against 'improvement'?— or what is the point of not focusing on 'value', 'quality' and 'positive thinking'?

Trimming the social body - Lean as 'common sense'

Lean is made appealing and attractive through a language that disambiguates and conquers the meaning of words like 'improvement', 'waste', or 'customer'. This happens through a range of links created from the language of Lean to a broader middle-class Western experience, which helps root lean in common *sense*. The stress on 'sense' is far from coincidental, because the language of lean receives its credibility from its resonance with other aspects of culturally mediated bodily experiences: With regard to Lean that kind of translation appears to a large extent through the language of sports. In his book *Managementality* (2004), Norwegian anthropologist Tian Sørhaug emphasises how sports

work as a vast supplier of managerial metaphors and models. This is true in the media, among consultants and managers— Think of words like 'yellow jerseys', 'benchmarking', 'coaching', 'teambuilding' etc. Sørhaug suggests that one of the reasons for this particular prevalence for sports is that for athletes as well as spectators, sports offer an emotional community (*sansefællesskab*), which in many respects resemble the religious *comunitas*: 'In a (seemingly) secularised world view, which is relatively bereft of arenas for generating enthusiasm, and which generally refuses religious ecstasy, sports fills a void' (Sørhaug 2004: 89). As Sørhaug's analysis implies it is through an appeal to the 'emotional community', that sports help to establish *common sense*. This works partly on a subconscious level beyond or outside of intellectual reasoning by invoking a range of positive sensations and experiences. I think Sørhaug's important point here is the way that sport is able to provide management thinking with experiential grounding. But I think his argument could be extended even further.

As a particular management concept Lean receives an important part of its legitimacy through its resonance with general cultural ideals about human bodies. As the common etymological root of the words 'organisation' and 'organism' suggests, the connection between the individual body and the social institution is deep—Indeed the body is the 'natural symbol' par excellence (Douglas, 2003; Turner, 1991). Jørgen Kjærgaard consultant from *Implement* writes to the same effect: It is our experience as consultants that what is crucial to succeed when you implement change is the simple fact that you choose to do it whole-heartedly. Just as in a personal training programme to get in shape: The results depend on the effort, which depend on the motivation (Kjærgaard, 2008: 53).

It is difficult to establish the connection empirically, but it is hardly a coincidence that at the same time as the 'Lean wave is rolling across the Public Sector' ('Lean-bølgen ruller igennem den offentlige sektor') (Rokkjør og Thams, 2008), the fitness-wave swept the country.⁷

The ideal models for being-in-the-world projected by sports (the slim, fit body) come to work as matrices of how to manage the organisation (the lean, trim organization), and, conversely, the ambition to be efficient become a dominant cultural ideal far beyond the workplace. In his book *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu pointed out the linkage between

sports and class (habitus) (Bourdieu, 1984: 211-220). Inspired by Bourdieu's point one might venture that fitness and running correspond to the career-ethos of a growing middle class who work long hours trying to compete for positions on increasingly precarious job markets: no pain, no gain. These are individual, flexible forms of exercise (i.e., sports to be engaged in alone). They are also forms of sport where the aesthetic and playful element is absent— Exercise is assumed to prevent stress, not because it is playful and fun, but because it stimulates production of endorphins, dopamine and reduce the stress-hormone cortisol. Fitness and running thus represent a specific type of sports defined by the fact that it is the abstract and future benefits that motivates rather than being part of a community or 'playing'/having fun *per se*. Last but not least running and fitness represent forms of exercise, where it is possible to meticulously plan and monitor your training, and make use of technologies like heart-rate-monitor, stop-watches, GPS and other equipment to *measure performance* and *optimize* training.

It is through a correspondence between the aims of the organization and broader cultural values pertaining to our relationship with our bodies that lean is legitimized and turned into common *sense*. And it is not only sports that are used to in-corporate the ideas and way of thinking and the organisation's streamlining attempts. In the book titled *Lean*, which was used as background material in the education of the local Lean-coordinators, the body-organisation link is emphasised in unequivocal terms:

Being on a Lean diet is not horrible...[but it requires a] change in lifestyle. In return we dare promise that the aim is not a life as a robot on a protective diet. Lean is about being trim the fun way- and to keep slender, agile and healthy in years to come...

...[T]here are no miracle diets, which makes the muda-fat vanish magically to make everybody ready for the bathing season. In return, Lean is a long-term change in life-style, which has proven to lead to greater profits and happier customers. And not least: dramatic increases in job satisfaction.

Just as it is difficult to argue in support of 'waste' and to be against 'improvement measures', to be 'slim' and 'agile' are deep-seated values in the Western middle

classes— and such values are very difficult to deny or resist. As soon as a cultural and social world can be represented as something 'natural', then it is relatively easy to dismiss alternative views - in so far as they are expressed at all (Herzfeld, 1986: 410).

Maybe it was a reaction to such a discursive closure that made some of the family counsellors compare Lean with 'Religion'. As Camilla said after a Lean introduction seminar: 'It seems almost religious with all those new words.' Just as a fundamentalist religion Lean presents itself with a glow of infallibility. The premise is that Lean is a simple and ideal system designed to eliminate waste and create well-being. As mentioned previously it follows that if something goes wrong then it is because employees are insufficiently motivated and managers have not been diligent and dedicated enough. Lean is, according to its proselytes, a 'positive approach'. When lean was introduced to the social workers it was repeatedly emphasized that Lean should not be viewed as a cost-cutting measure. Instead it should be seen as a 'development' or 'growth approach' (*udviklings og væksttankegang*). Thus the public management consultant Søren Sønderby and Lean consultant Thomas Bøhm Christiansen write about the municipal Lean initiative:

The past years have seen budgetary strains in large parts of the public sector. The challenges have been in the nature of- or been perceived as- spending cuts. Even if one of the primary aims of Lean is to utilize resources better, it is a very bad idea to see Lean as a way to cutting costs or rationalise. Lean has been developed as a growth or development mind-set, the aim of which is to release resources from non-value adding activities to value-adding activities. Lean is therefore driven by strategic visions and not cutting expenses (Christiansen & Sønderby, 2008: 13)

After budgetary agreements and cutbacks, however, such appeals to look at the glass as half full rather than half empty do not sound convincing to many social workers. As one family counsellor and Lean coordinator expressed it: 'We (sic!) can't guarantee anything. We can't know if a 'Hammer of Thor' lands on our heads tomorrow' (Helle). As mentioned Lean has been developed in the private sector manufacturing industry. And here the consequences of rationalisations are likely to be different than in the public sector. One of the differences between the manufacturing industry and work in the public

sector is that the public sector doesn't 'produce' anything in the strict sense of the term. The point of the public sector is not to expand business or create new needs (Lipsky, 1980: 33). Quite the reverse: In a period of tax stop it is likely to be a zero-sum game in another sense than in a private company, where Lean rationalisations 'can translate into greater market share' (Tapping et al., 2003: 15). Several of the counsellors doubted that the efficiency returns would benefit the workers. As a counsellor with a long experience told me: 'We run fast enough. Last month Niels [the manager of the social centre] said: If one more reports ill the entire system will break! Savings are everywhere, everybody are short of resources [...] [so] if we learn to run a bit faster- snap! We get to run a bit faster still!'

Tian Sørhaug points out that the word 'enough' does not exist in the language of capital accumulation— only the words 'too little' or 'more' (Sørhaug, 2004: 99). A similar ethos can be recognised in Lean in the principle of *Kaizen*, and in the idea that searching for and eliminating waste can continue indefinitely. The idea of continuous improvement is one of the key principles of Lean, and in the books about Lean it is put forward as an uplifting message about striving for 'perfection': 'It dawns on those involved that there is no end to the process of reducing effort, time, space, cost, and mistakes while offering a product which is ever more nearly what the customer actually wants. Suddenly *perfection*, the fifth and final principle of Lean thinking doesn't seem like a crazy idea' (Womack & Jones, 2003: 25). But how is the idea of 'perfection'— the Latin word 'perficio' means 'without faults', 'whole' or 'complete'— compatible with the idea that one's aspirations never end?

Lean strives towards 'improvement' and 'perfection' and is put forward as a positive, proactive strategy marked by 'energy and organisational self-confidence' (Kjærgaard 2008: 8). Stine who had a long experience as a family counsellor had difficulties accommodating the focus on waste and flaws with a positive outlook:

There is a hidden mistrust behind all this. Lean is all about writing more, documenting more. We are continuously checked and measured (målt og vejjet). This produces a lot of extra hours. We have to register and journalize- and on top of that we have all the stories in the media, which you know about how we don't do

things well enough and only spend ...was it fifteen per cent of our time on the clients? We're never good enough!

Is Lean 'muda'?

The idea of Lean in a public sector context is to streamline and rationalise work processes, i.e., to optimize the use of time. One of the concerns expressed by the counsellors was the lack of time, and their main problem with Lean was that it had taken time away from other useful activities. Hanne who was one of the Lean coordinators said:

They [the counsellors] can't involve themselves in Lean, they have enough to do on their casework. [...] They have spent a lot of time on it to start with. I think in this social Centre people spent what amounts to six working-days to familiarize themselves with Lean, including kick-off days, value stream-mapping and redesign and I don't know what... They spend six days and a number of task forces were set up that people were supposed to join, and everybody was dying, and then Lean does become unpopular...

To a certain degree Lean could be said to be defeated by its own logic and the paradoxical circumstance that it takes resources to save resources and takes time to save time— Social workers had been 'purchased' (frikøbt) to be in charge of the Lean project, and two Lean consultants had been employed in a period, when the social centres were under severe strain. But the Lean consultants were part of the staff and so did not themselves contribute to the core-service and were in this sense and by Leans own definition examples of 'muda' - waste.

Lean ideals and the slender employee

Implicit in Lean is an idea of the rational, utilitarian agent with unambiguous motives, aims and ambitions, which are identical to those of the organization. Niels Ahrengot, CEO of Implement, which was the key external consultancy in the Lean project in the municipalities, wrote in a large Danish Newspaper:

Only at the moment when Lean and continuous improvement have been deeply rooted as a natural part of every employees work life has Lean been implemented.

But the journey is not over. It never ends. [...] It is a mental journey rather than a question of developing techniques and competences. It is only at the moment when the organisation realises that things can be improved that it embarks on the production of results that characterize the world elite. And when you have realised that, I can assure you that Lean has nothing to do with Taylor and Lenin. If it is not both rewarding and fun for each and every employee to fully utilize his or her potential and contribute to the common success, I don't know what it is (Ahrengot 2006).

As emerges from the quote proponents of Lean often make a point to demarcate Lean as something different from the stop-watch tyranny of 'Taylorism'. The question is if Lean is really as different from 'scientific management' as its champions suggest. Measurement and time management are key features, and the ideas that 'waste' or rationalizations can be defined unequivocally are reminiscent of Taylor's idea of rationalizations and his insistence that there was 'one best way'.⁸

As Ahrengot mentions one of the key differences between the two strategies of rationalization is that in the Lean context employees are directly involved in decisions around rationalizations. There is nothing inherently wrong with that, of course, providing that it is recognised that the workers might have other interests than those pointed out by management to be the most 'rational'.⁹

The problem is that according to Lean employee job-satisfaction and motivation amounts to:

- The company/organisation is successful and generates a surplus.
- The employee and his/her colleagues do their work effectively, i.e., without waste and with a view to the customer's needs.

But there are other and more important reasons why the counsellors go to work- and sometimes their professionalism and interests collide with the conditions under which they have to work. Many counsellors saw Lean as an expression of an increasingly dominant management culture:

It is this management language that comes in: brown paper, incentive structures, performance measurement, effect and result measurements, management by objectives, self-management...The focus has shifted. We employ people to check if we behave according to the measurement standards. That is alright up to a point. But we have reached that point long ago. We spend far too much energy on that (Susan).

The far majority of the counsellors were sceptical. Bente showed me the legal corpus [lovgrundlag] that informed the counsellors' work and pointed out that it had increased by a factor 4 from 2002 and 2006: 'This is just an indication that our workload has increased. But we don't get more resources, and on top of that you have all the measurement, which takes time. And then we have people like yourself running and making investigations. I hope we can use it for something'.

POSTSCRIPT

One day in April 2017 I revisited my field and talked to three of the family counsellors that I hadn't seen for seven years. They now worked in family centers in different parts of the city. Without regret they all told me about the many relocations, reorganisations, and reforms that had been through since we lost contact in 2010. They reported that their general working conditions had improved: more social workers had been employed and the number of casefiles per social worker had been significantly reduced.

When Lean was brought up, the previous fear and anger was gone, leaving it open whether 'Lean thinking' had disappeared —or become 'second nature'. As one family counselor said: "Lean is not alive anymore. The meetings are gone...[pause] but... we take what we can use, and leave what does not make sense... some things are forgotten, and then there are some relics that live on in practice that has been reformed in a good way- but I don't know where Lean is in all that..."

¹ I have made 21 interviews of 1-1 1/2 hours with family counsellors, office staff, managers and lean-consultants. Over the course of two years I have participated in Lean introductions, kaizen meetings and a one-day Lean-seminar. Apart from that I have followed the family counsellors in their work and taken part in their meetings with citizens, network meetings between citizen, counsellors and collaborators [smarbejdspartnere], altogether a month of participant observation spread over two years. Apart from fieldwork at the Social centre, the investigation is based on reading of Lean-

literature, reports and material, prioritizing the material and literature that was used as teaching material in Lean project of the municipality.

² In the following I have anonymised my informants through giving them other names, and in one case another gender identity. The main part of fieldwork took place at one of the municipality's four social centers, but I also did interviews with a couple of consultants and social workers from the other centers.

³ Several social workers thus mentioned an improvement, where the categories on the form that the 'collaborators' [samarbejdspartnerne] (i.e., those who should come up with the 'statement on the child' [børneudtalelserne], which was a key part of the § 50 investigation to make it fit the key points of attention [fokusområderne] in the § 50 investigation itself (family, behaviour and development, friendships, school- and daycare etc.).

⁴ See for instance :

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Enslev Jensen, B. and P. K. Greve (2007). Lean med hjertet. Kbh., Børsen.

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⁵ Taichi Ohno is the name of the Toyota-engineer who is said to have invented the Toyota Production System and who described the system in his book *Toyota production system: Beyond large-scale production*. Portland: Productivity Press (1988).

⁶ 'An externality is the effect of a transaction to a party who has not consented to or played any role in the carrying out of that transaction' (Milton Friedman in Bakan 2004: 61). Seen from a single business' point of view it might be efficient and rational to set demands so high that the workers are burned out or worn down, because this does not appear as red numbers on the bottom-line that people are forced to receive early retirement benefits. But, obviously such line of reasoning and practice is neither effective nor rational from a larger economic perspective.

⁷ In Denmark there are reported to be 380.000 active fitness users (in 2010). Fitness has taken over soccer as the preferred form of sport in Denmark (www.fitness.dk, accessed november 19, 2010). As one of his first acts when he took up his office in 2007, the

Danish minister of Health Jakob Axel Nielsen suggested that the workplace offer of fitness to its employees should be tax deductible.

⁸ The term 'rationalisation' is linked to Frederick Taylor's idea of Scientific Management. It was the proponents of Taylor's ideas that invented the word 'rationalisation' and the idea that there was 'one best (scientific) way to organise production. By implication, not choosing to organise production this way was 'irrational' (Bjørkman 1990).

⁹ It is important to not romanticize the assembly line – but in this context it is worth remembering Edward's remarks about forms of control under Taylorism: 'These earlier systems of control left considerable leeway of tolerance for the workers to express other behavior to create their own ambience or culture in the workplace. There existed a certain breathing space' (Edwards 1979: 148).

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