

Abstract for

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**Sense and sensibility in marginal work: cruel optimism, recycling and the
practice of dignity in everyday life**

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What is happening to work? Since future trends are perceived in the margins of organised regimes, I was drawn to Uusix – a unit of social entrepreneurship. The place seems emblematic of our time: welfare state's desperate attempt to recycle workforce – already liquidated – back to the fastidious market, through rehabilitation. Or perhaps we might say that it's the workfare state's (Kettunen 2011) attempt to deal with the workforce left useless when unable to meet the growing demands of flexible organizations willing to commit only to the "talented" core workforce. However one might choose to phrase the nature of the activity, it happens in the rusty setting of material leftover from the mainstream economy, in an old waist burning centre, in the outskirts of Helsinki.

The official aim of this municipal unit is to receive unemployed citizens with a difficulty to find employment ("losers"), and rehabilitate them with the help of a range of different recycling workshops where shop masters ("secured") and supervisors ("precarious") familiarise them with artisanal production and refamiliarise them with the routines and requirements of employed life. All well, except the return to employment: very few will actually see again in their lives a mainstream wage paid to them. Instead, they circulate in the margins. The employment officials, themselves not present at Uusix, turn as it were a huge wheel that tosses people from one place to another. In this, they follow the laws made by politicians unable or unwilling to admit that late-liberal work market is exclusionary (see Ho 2009), and therefore creating unemployment schemes that frame the unemployed as victims of character defects instead of victims of industrial restructuring. These laws have become instruments of social engineering, making the receivers of unemployment benefits dependent of behavioural conditionality (see Standing 2009), like showing progress in obeying working hours. Such is the misery tale of my fieldwork.

But there was more to Uusix. From my first visit, the rich visual and textual world of its materials surprised me with its contrasting aesthetics: beauty, humour and practical use actually were made out of "waste", in the spirit of Michel de Certeau, and in line with future demands of ecological sustainability. People also seemed to feel variously about being there. Sorrow, anger and

resentment were present, but so were also hope, sociality and inspiration. It was not a forced labour camp. Many of the "client-workers" asked the employment officials a continuation to their three months term, or a second continuation, up to the "maximum" rehabilitation time, two years. Clearly not in hope of mainstream employment. What then? Gradually, I have discovered that the same question seems to puzzle the supervisors and client-workers. What are these activities all about—work, training, punishment or perhaps therapy? How to design and perform them while maintaining one's and one another's dignity?

Lauren Berlant (2011) describes the uneasy slumber in which late modern, "western" citizens linger, suffering from the cruelly optimist attachments to passions that consume or end in divorce, food that fattens, careers that label you inadequate, houses you can't afford and stimulants that addict you. The post war promises of good life have faded under neoliberalism, but the egos can't give up their dreams.

What happens when sudden injury forces an ego to separate from its optimist attachments? During the last six months, I have witnessed an industrial downsizing episode in my university, while simultaneously continuing fieldwork among people who are experts of experience in being cast as losers. I have been able to contrast colleagues' reactions and attempts to keep up a bearable sense of being in the world with those at the people at Uusix. There seems to be much to learn from the latter. For instance, they practise a delicate balance between sensibility to feelings of loss and anger – giving room for grief – and keeping up a sensible self control. Civilised manners are necessary to uphold a sociality in face of the ephemeralising forces that threaten at any time to scatter all emerging communities. They also need self control to run such everyday practices that take material owned by others to their own use and make a liveable place for themselves (Certeau 1990). Both kinds of people have faced cruel optimism in suggestions from above that they should work hard and hope to win the grace of being counted in the number of the "innovative talents" or the "employable citizens". How do they act? Is their only chance in copying the readily available stereotypes – that fit the way an iron maiden does – or, can they produce meanings of their own, and if so, can they win acceptance in the larger society, to such autonomous or local identities? How hard a nut is the neoliberal winner-loser image to break?

My fieldwork has approached—for six months now—practical activity, its tactics, politics and morals, and the subjects fashioned in the process (see Räsänen 2009). I have strained my sense and sensitivity, both with participants and among my own bewildered and uprooted attachments as a liquidated academic. I believe to be on the right track in the sense that the above described wrestling is spreading wider in the society. Less and less people count in the

number of the chosen few – and less yet can do so without constant fear. Replacement services and various coaching and rehabilitation services are among the few industries that grow in today's Europe. Future brings in more material recycling, that is easy to predict. But will it also make us (almost) all subject to some kind of Foucauldian scene of rehabilitation, to shape our selves endlessly, hysterically – in the absence of suitable, humane wage labour or material activity to engage with? And which are the actual forms this might take in the context of austerity measures?

All comments related to methods or results are welcome, and I anticipate discussing related experiences with delegates. My fieldwork still continues, so I can return to it with you questions and ideas.

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