Chapter 4

Temp(t)ing Bodies: Shaping Gender at Work in Japan

Japanese enterprises are offsetting high costs of long-term regular employment by expanding “flexible” part-time and temporary employment in a larger effort at work reorganization. Japan, an industrialized country that had led the way in new management styles, can deepen our understanding of organizational gendering of precarity beyond Western experiences. Precarity is not only produced through macro-economic forces, but also through concrete organizational practices in local settings. Temporary-help agencies do more than dispatch workers to client firms. They are global players reshaping career paths and labor markets, both within countries and cross-borders. Even more so, the temporary-help agency performs the alchemist trick of commodifying labor power. These agencies are in the business of creating a mobile workforce for their client firms. What they sell, as both Marx and Polanyi posit in different ways, is a special commodity, a corporeal and a mental capacity to labor.

A case study of temporary employment provided by a multinational temporary-help company situates the global in culturally local contexts of gendered work and employment conditions. The analysis makes visible the situated forms of body management and the production of modes of embodiment in a gender regime as ways of organizing and ordering masculinities and femininities in an asymmetrical valued hierarchy. Organizational embodiment and gendered work are linked to new forms of labor market segmentation and precaritization. The reproductive bargain serves as the framework in which these firms operate and mobilize labor to dispatch to placement companies.

Feminist Theories of Embodiment

The Body at Work and the Work on the Body

Feminists debate the relationship between the “cultural” and the “material” in analyses and explanations of the pattern of gender relations in work and organizations (see Adkins and Lury 1996), and conceptualize embodiment as a new focus on the body at work, in organizations, and as labor (see Acker 1990; Halford et al. 1997; Tyler and Abbott 1998; Witz et al. 1996; Cohen et al. 2013).
A review of feminist scholarship on embodiment highlights the workplace as a site of cultural as well as material (re)production.

The influential literature on the body at work in bureaucratic organizations by Joan Acker (1990), and the more recent study of body work as work on one’s own and others’ bodies (Cohen et al. 2013), draws attention to the process of gendering and embodiment to explain the fault-lines of labor market segmentation. By using the verb “gendering,” Acker emphasizes how gender relations are embedded in the way major institutions are organized. Building on this perspective, Halford et al. (1997) propose a paradigm of “gender and organizations” that sees gender as both embedded and embodied. Embodiment refers to modes of being in bodies (Morgan 1998, 655) and “the ways of inhabiting the world” (Mascia-Lees 2011, 1–2). A mode of embodiment is gendered: “gender rests not only on the surface of the body, in performance and doing, but becomes embodied – becomes deeply part of who we are physically and psychologically [and socially]” (Martin 1998, 495, emphasis in the original).

Bureaucratic organizations validate and permit forms of masculine embodiment and invalidate or render impermissible forms of feminine embodiment (Witz 1998, 5). For women, the discursive construction of the reproductive body assumes particular importance in disqualifying them from authority positions and is continually evoked as the kernel of embodied difference (Halford et al. 1997, 213; Witz 1998, 6). The sexualized body represents another discursive and material construction of feminine embodiment whereby women have been included, qualifying them for certain front-stage and subordinate organizational functions (Witz 1998, 7; also see Adkins and Lury 1996). These dual processes of qualifying and disqualifying particular aspects of feminine embodiment shape the development of sexualized cultures in which organizational gendering takes place.

Feminist organizational analysis links embodiment and gendered work to an analysis of new forms of labor market segmentation around aesthetic labor, particularly but not exclusively in service industries where employees are increasingly being called upon to develop particular forms of embodied skills in the service encounter. According to Witz (1998), “aesthetic labor describes the mobilization of embodied capacities and competencies possessed by organizational participants. This definition foregrounds the sensible components of social interaction.” Women must achieve and maintain a particular “state of embodiment” (Tyler and Abbott 1998, 434), expressed through modes of speech, accent and style that conform to a set of gender attributes that embody socially sanctioned but variable characteristics of masculinity and femininity (McDowell 1997, 31). The organization polices and demands “constant vigilance regarding gender self-presentation at work” (Wajcman 1998, 10).