

## *Book Review / Recension*

Marjorie L. DeVault. (Ed.). (2008). *People at Work: Life, Power and Social Inclusion in the New Economy*. New York and London: New York University Press. viii+344 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8147-2004-2 (paperback)

Godfrey Baldacchino, Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Prince Edward Island

When Harry Braverman's *Labour and Monopoly Capital* hit the bookstands in 1974, it vigorously reasserted the power of Marxist-inspired radical theory to analyse and deconstruct the workings of the emerging post-industrial, post-Fordist societies of the developed world. However, what it also did at the time was to relegate the sociology of work and organization to essentially structural considerations, with individual workers degraded as reactive, often stereotypical operatives, agents of classes, aggregates, or status groups. This deficiency led to the subsequent evolution of Labour Process Theory and the Regulation School, both of which sought to develop a left-leaning critique of neo-liberalism that still acknowledged the strictures of capitalism and its regime of accumulation without cheating individuals and workers from strategies, choices, and voices. DeVault's volume is a contribution to this rich literature that confronts the prevalent logic and absolutism of the free market by adopting as its vantage point the lived and place-based experience of work, and the social relations that inform it.

*People at Work* is a masterly compilation of essays that speak to the descriptive and analytic power of 'institutional ethnography': a technique that analyses work, broadly defined, by means of an appreciation of its institutional framework, and how (at times pesky) workers and ruling regimes negotiate the messy (and at times contradictory) socio-technical relations of production. The text acknowledges early on its indebtedness to Dorothy E. Smith, the prominent Canadian social theorist

who pioneered institutional ethnography as a research methodology that highlights the connectivities that exist between the locations of everyday life, people's professional practice, and policy making or its administration. These multiple linkages are mainly articulated and operationalized via "texts" that embody social and organizational control: whether they are aptitude assessment tools for labelling schoolchildren; charts for monitoring patients' progress and their insurance payments; or the inadvertent screening of welfare-reliant trainees for eventual employability. These are some of the real life work scenarios that are problematized, and 'textualized', in this book.

DeVault presents us with a meticulously edited volume: she crafts detailed introductions and conclusions and introduces each section of the book as well as each individual chapter with very helpful commentaries, all to ensure that the text does come together as a vibrant and coherent whole. The method of analysis is ethnographic throughout, sensitive to textual and discursive dimensions of social life, but more concerned with macro, political-economic contexts than most qualitative, micro-targeted approaches.

The thirteen articles that comprise the main body of this text are organized into four distinct sections. Part I illustrates the activities of four distinct sets of people (in four distinct chapters) with the intent to guide and scrutinize a global and neo-liberal ideological apparatus and its discourses or 'currencies': competitiveness, accountability, market-induced efficiency, atomized self-sufficiency, and dignified social inclusion through paid work. These high order values and concepts, which permeate through the book (just as they permeate contemporary society), are often implicit in surveillance, supervision, management, and other forms of audit with which workers today have become dangerously habituated.

Moving to Part II, information technology work and food processing are the platforms for the respective analysis of 'incorporation without inclusion': how North American employers are deftly absolved from the responsibility for the care and reproductive needs of 'H1-B Visa' immigrant workers from India and Mexico because the latter only gain access to the labour market as temporary or contingent labour.

The theme of personal responsibility persists in Section III, this time in relation to how work requirements and schedules structure and limit access to social welfare benefits. Looking in turn at low wage women workers, college and university professors, and deaf-blind college students, four chapters weave stories about the considerable pressure that is brought to bear on (typically young) individuals for them to adopt, accept, and internalize detached, disembodied, and mutually exclusive 'texts' of work and life. No sense of 'work-life balance' here.

The fourth and final section focuses on the ideology of the 'new public management' programs (similar to the 'public finance initiatives' of the UK introduced by Margaret Thatcher), where public financial supports are cut with gusto and public services are contracted out/privatized in the name of lower taxes and smaller government. The change from citizen to client focus is more than just a change of words.

*People at Work* is designed for mapping "how it works" (p. 295) and how things are "put together" (p. 8), seeking to make sense out of the circumstances of how situated structure confronts agency in everyday working life. In privileging the embodiment of social control, DeVault and her contributors also assign – correctly, to my mind – a pivotal significance to place and location. This stance, which privileges the geographical, is contrary to one that would pronounce the death of geography and distance in an age of presumed borderlessness and pure mobility.

For Canadian educators, the text is a chilling critique of how the texts, discourses, and symbols that pervade educational and training provision typically serve not to question, but to reproduce and strengthen a regime of market ascendancy and individualism that discounts the role of social cooperation and government in contemporary society. Such would be telling from an institutional ethnography of most schools, colleges, and universities. Arguably, by thus exposing the structures and processes, with their hallowed underlying principles, that are doggedly shaping values, are we better equipped and disposed to engineer the "motors and mechanisms of change" (p. 22) that many of us may aspire to? As DeVault argues in her pithy conclusion, once the relations of power are more clearly manifest, they *could* be confronted with better chances of "arranging things differently" (p. 301) as outcome. I am, alas,

not so optimistic. But, as illustrative of a methodology for unpacking the interstices of power relations at work in the new economy, *People at Work* does a mighty fine job.