

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Marjorie L. DeVault, ed., *People at Work: Life, Power, and Social Inclusion in the New Economy*. New York: New York University Press, 2008, 352 pp. \$US 25.00 paper (0814720048), \$US 75.00 hardcover (081472003X)

The world of work has been undergoing rapid and profound transformations over the past few decades. The thirteen original essays in *People at Work* make a very important contribution to rendering visible the intricacies of these changes. The central goal of the book is to demonstrate how the diverse lives of people at work are shaped by global process of economic restructuring. The authors adopt a “generous concept of work” which includes all activities that ensure social reproduction. They vividly underscore that too many people are being dragged into neo-liberal capitalist “ruling relations” and that their experiences of work are increasingly alienating rather than fulfilling and liberating. What is more, the case studies paint a dismal portrait of how economic restructuring undermines people’s ability to attend to their own sustenance with dignity and to provide care for those who are dependent on them at home or as clients in paid work. Borrowing from Joan Acker, several authors illustrate the extent to which many people are forced to conform to the model of the “unencumbered worker” who frees employers and the state from responsibility for people’s sustenance.

The most distinctive contribution of the book lies in its use of the analytic method of institutional ethnography to explore the social relations of work that structure people’s everyday lives. This mode of analysis, pioneered by the sociologist Dorothy E. Smith, emphasizes “connections among the sites and situations of everyday life, management/professional practice, and policymaking, considered from people’s locations in everyday life.” The authors demonstrate how texts of various kinds are used to direct the activities of people and coordinate social relations that connect people across sites of action. The studies in this book focus on how texts that are built on and promote neoliberal ideologies and practices are used as mechanisms of control that obscure the real lives of people.

The first section of the book, “Ideologies of the Neoliberal Economy,” acquaints readers with the main ideologies that have become entrenched as the key props of the so-called new economy. These

“conceptual currencies” of policymakers focus on market-based competitiveness, efficiency, personal accountability and responsibility, and individual empowerment and inclusion through participation in economic activity. Each chapter in this section attempts to flesh out and flush out the relations of ruling that bring activities in particular work locales in line with broader institutional and managerial discourses and understandings. Nancy Jackson and Bonnie Slade unveil how literacy requirements in a high-tech Canadian workplace conflict with a racialized jobs’ hierarchy, perpetuating the story of a literacy crisis told by those in positions of power and consequently shaping a policy agenda of training and public education. Alison I. Griffith and Lois André-Bechely seek to understand the new demands for public-school accountability that compel teachers and parents in Canada and the United States to engage in the work of standardizing testing and curricula, highlighting how the interests of local business and publishing enterprises are strengthened while the interests of teachers and parents are shrouded in an ideology of personal responsibility. Nancy C. Jurik also highlights the rhetoric of personal responsibility and accountability in the implementation of a microlending program in the United States that sought to alleviate poverty, but lost effectiveness as it became wrapped up in dominant neoliberal discourses of empowerment, entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency. Rannveig Traustadóttir pursues this theme of self-sufficiency, showing how the struggle for access and inclusion by disability-rights activists in Iceland has been co-opted by neoliberal discourse in a way that potentially puts persons with disabilities at greater risk in the labour market.

The conceptual currencies of the neoliberal era are further explored in the remaining three sections of the book. The two sections, “Mobile Bodies: Incorporation Without Inclusion” and “The Fictional Worlds of ‘Unencumbered Workers’,” examine in depth how these conceptual currencies are written into the texts that define strategies and practices of the state and management, and give shape to specific sites of work. Two chapters, one by Payal Banerjee, the other by Nancy A. Naples, focus on the regulation of labour within and across national borders. Banerjee reveals how the relentless search for labour flexibility and just-in-time workers gives rise to complex and multi-layered subcontracting systems that marginalize even high-skilled workers, while Naples examines how processes of labour recruitment in small town America are rife with barriers to full citizenship for new residents. Both show how labour regulation is racialized and how labour flexibility strategies minimize the role of employers and the state in ensuring the reproductive needs of workers. The conceptual currency of personal responsibility dominates four chapters where the authors highlight how people are compelled to

live increasingly as though they were unencumbered and disembodied. Chapters by Brenda Solomon and by Ellen K. Scott and Andrew S. London emphasize the deleterious effects of transformations in the US welfare system where individuals are exhorted to be self-sufficient, become employable and avoid dependency on the state. Catherine Richards Solomon examines how the ideological code of the star internalized in academic work serves to further individualize such work and creates two-track labour systems. Katrina Arndt's study of the education-to-work transitions of deafblind students in the United States illustrates how these students are entreated to make personal decisions, yet must face institutional structures and bureaucratic decisions that ignore their individual experience and knowledge.

The final section of the book, "Fiscal Discipline: The Texts of Public-Sector Budget Cutting," point to the tremendous impacts of economic restructuring on the lives of workers and clients alike, while exposing the emptiness of the promises of empowerment and choice. Frank Ridzi examines how changes to social welfare programs in the United States have resulted in clients becoming contractors of caregiving labour, reinforcing a gendered low-wage workforce and disadvantaging clients who have limited resources. Yvette Daniel's scrutiny of a provincial educational funding policy that required teachers, administrators and professionals to assess and document special students' needs shows how competition for resources under conditions of fiscal restraint pulled these workers into a complex web of activities that wasted resources and moved from the needs of individual students to textualized profiles of need. In her examination of the work of home care aides, their supervisors and schedulers, and the clients with disabilities for whom they provide care, Marie Campbell highlights how contracting and accounting of services and quality contradicts the health system's goal of ensuring continuity of care and contributes to the proliferation of bad jobs in the new economy.

Marjorie DeVault has produced an edited collection with a strong sense of purpose. These rich ethnographic studies provide a vivid portrayal of the difficulties, complexities and contradictions of the everyday lives of countless workers in the new economy. This collection also exposes the workings of economic restructuring and neoliberalism by showing how change happens in people's embodied lives, and how textual discourse and practice play a powerful role in coordinating, ordering, dominating, degrading and obscuring people's lives. The volume is testimony to the strength and adaptability of institutional ethnography as a method of enquiry and analysis.

DeVault has done an admirable job of providing structure and direction for the book through her excellent introductory and concluding chapters, and her short introductions to each section and chapter. While the quality of chapters does vary, the overall quality of the book is very high and the chapters offer interesting perspectives on embodied experiences of work, from a wide range of disciplines. This book makes an indispensable contribution to the study of work and should be read by social scientists, policymakers, trade unionists, and social welfare practitioners.

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