

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Linda McDowell, *Working Bodies: Interactive Service Employment and Workplace Identities*. Malden MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2009, 288 pp. \$47.95 paper (978-1-4051-5978-4), \$107.95 hardcover (978-1-4051-5977-7)

Working Bodies: Interactive Service Employment and Workplace Identities is testimony to both Linda McDowell's own expertise as a researcher and theorist of work, and the tremendous output of quality scholarship on service sector employment over the past two decades. Between the covers of this beautifully crafted book is a thoughtful, innovative, and thorough analysis of high-touch interactive service work that draws on numerous case studies and ethnographies, mostly from the United Kingdom, and on the author's own original research.

The first three chapters establish a contextual, conceptual, and theoretical foundation for the subsequent analysis of specific examples of interactive service work. McDowell provides an informative review of discussions about the transformation of labour markets in advanced industrial economies, focusing particularly on the United Kingdom. She challenges the widely held assumption that a knowledge-based economy founded on high-level work, often of a virtual nature, has become predominant with the ebbing of manufacturing, offering evidence instead of the growing importance of embodied, poorly paid, casualized, and precarious forms of service employment, and of polarization in the quality, experiences, and rewards of work in a service-based economy. McDowell highlights social and spatial divisions of labour, pointing to old patterns of inequality, based on gender, ethnicity and race, and nationality, that are being strengthened, and to new ones that are taking hold in an economy that favours specific sets of skills and attributes. Contrary to prevailing arguments about a radical or epochal shift in forms of work, she contends that a narrative of continuity is more useful to describe and understand many of the changes that we are witnessing, notwithstanding important modifications to the nature and location of different types of work (such as domestic service and sex work) which are part and parcel of a new international spatial division of labour.

McDowell truly shines in her discussion of the growing significance of the body-work relationship. She synthesizes and elaborates on theories that deal with embodiment, corporeality, emotional labour, sexuality and

desire, showing their fundamental relevance for understanding ongoing processes of labour market segmentation, and their influence on how social interactions, social relations, and social identities are constructed and reshaped in workplaces. Different dimensions of embodiment interact to produce hierarchies of desirable and appropriate bodies for different types of paid work. Through this process, gendered, classed, and racialized identities are created, performed, and resisted. Throughout, the centrality of the body to the worker-client exchange is highlighted.

In the next several chapters, McDowell discusses a wide range of case studies dealing with what she has labelled high-touch interactive jobs that demand the co-presence of the provider and the purchaser of a service. Arguments developed in the first section of the book help in understanding who does what sort of embodied work, where the work takes place, what tasks are involved in different types of jobs, and the differential rewards reaped by workers in various parts of the service economy. Three chapters deal with high-touch servicing work in both private and public settings. This includes embodied work largely undertaken by working-class women such as paid domestic work, particularly the work of nannies, domestics, and others in the private homes of employers, and sex work in a variety of locations such as massage parlours and brothels, on the streets, and in cars and rooms. She also considers the embodied work usually done by working-class men, such as boxers, doormen and bouncers, and firefighters. Her focus then shifts to public workplaces that tend to be considered more conventional, such as shops and fast food outlets, hospitals, care homes, and hotels. Some jobs in these workplaces are very high-touch, requiring intervention on elderly and sick bodies as well as the improvement, adornment, and beautification of the bodies of clients and customers. Others involve less direct body contact, but require interactive work, usually scripted, that produces particular appearances and embodied performances based on emotions such as empathy and deference.

In every case, McDowell shows how the class, gender, ethnic and racial, and national attributes of workers interconnect to create an acceptable body for specific types of work in particular work spaces. We are provided, for example, with stark reminders of the association of cleaning and caring with attributes of femininity or, as the author states “as a natural talent embodied by women rather than a skill constructed through training.” She argues that the association of strength and aggression with masculinity disadvantages young working-class men in many service sector jobs to which labour market entrants with few skills and credentials are restricted. We are also presented with ample evidence of how certain characteristics, such as skin colour and age, are used to dif-

ferentiate workers and rank them according to what McDowell calls a hierarchy of desirability and acceptability, creating inequities in financial and other workplace rewards.

While the main focus of the book is the immediate workplace, McDowell uses concepts of place, space, and scale to chart social relations of wage labour and divisions in the labour market at multiple spatial scales. For example, the global division of labour takes shape through migrants to the United Kingdom being employed in the most local of jobs by transnational firms. And employment agencies, through their recruitment policies and practices, play a key role in constructing a gendered and racialized labour force. McDowell also broadens the spatial scale to investigate the disturbing connections between sex work and transnational migration, ethnicity, tourism, and trafficking.

Considerable attention is devoted to methodological issues. McDowell often comments on how some of the research she uses was carried out. In Chapter 6 she critically assesses practices of ethnography and auto-ethnography, with an emphasis on researchers' positionality. The concluding chapter includes a discussion of the feasibility and desirability of generalization from ethnographies and case studies of particular workplaces. Concluding that "generalization is not always necessary and certainly not disabling," she insists on the importance of connecting such studies to theories of structural change.

A human geographer, Linda McDowell set out to demonstrate that a geographical analysis of work and employment provides a unique lens through which to explore high-touch service work. She was also committed to interrogating theories from other social sciences, especially sociology, to produce a sophisticated understanding of embodied interactive service work. She accomplished both tasks admirably. Many of the issues are complex and the discussions are intricate, but the arguments are well developed, and the writing is clear and accessible. This ambitious book is insightful and informative, and it makes a valuable contribution to the study of work in contemporary capitalist societies. *Working Bodies* is worthwhile reading for all those in the social sciences and humanities who are interested in exploring, in a creative fashion, work and its transformation, and who are concerned about the nature and direction of work and employment in the service economy.

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