

such a simple book is more socially useful than the next freshly minted Ph.D. thesis by a student fired with passion and commitment to changing the world?

The old style political economy and anarchist flavour of this book, with its tendency to imply conspiracy, make it seem out of date and just a little tired. It also makes for arguments that will find much disagreement among the academic audience. Despite this, it is worth the read for its timely wake-up call that questions the primacy of the academic approach—the high theory, the rigorous analytical approach, the dense and exacting argument—to dealing with one of the major issues of our time; for its relevance to being able to fight information with information.

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### **Workplaces of the Future**

Paul Thompson and Chris Warhurst (Eds)

*London, Macmillan, 1998, xi + 230pp., £16.99 (pbk), ISBN 0-333-72800-9 (pbk), ISBN 0-333-727991(hbk)*

This book is part of the Macmillan Business series titled 'Critical Perspectives on Work and Organisations' originating out of the Annual International Labour Process Conference. The editors claim in the Preface that the International Labour Process Conference has always had the aim of providing empirically informed theoretical analysis. Readers are left to guess about this presumably UK based Conference as little more information is provided.

The editors also claim that the series needed a book that 'returned to save the "classical" roots of labour process writings' focussing on 'some of the core themes of changes in the nature of work itself' (p. vi). This they claim is necessary to counter the current period where 'popular discourse is deluged with futuristic babble' (p. vi). The book consists of 11 chapters from 18 contributing authors. The majority come from Scotland and England, two from the US and two from Austria. The main contributors include Ruth Milkman, Andy Danford, Steve Taylor, Joan Greenbaum, Kate Mulholland and Mike Dent.

The contents of the chapters are diverse. Topics include the sick building syndrome; the impact of computer information systems on the design of work organisation; discussion of the labour process in terms of producing and operating software; reaction to examples of devolution of responsibility at the workplace; discussion on the trend in the medical industry in Europe in following the US market driven model; an account of a case study on the changing role of managers in a large government utility undergoing privatisation; and a bottom line response to the path of the 'high road' in the US: the move toward a high wage, high skill economy.

In the introductory chapter, the editors set the tone of the selection of contributions by using the title, 'Hands Hearts and Minds: Changing Work and Workers at the End of the Century' (p. 1) thus giving emphasis to the human dimension. They link the recent past—by reference to the 'old Taylorist and Fordist forms' (p. 19)—to the present, when they say 'managers have sought to develop a variety of coping mechanisms in the form of cross-functional and on-line teams, thus creating a shadow of the division of labour' (p. 19). They refer to this as the 'new workplace' and conclude that despite this change

it 'is still easily recognisable for the vast majority who too often remain poorly motivated, overworked and undervalued' (p. 19). As for what the future may bring, they predict that, at base, there will be 'no single or simple future work/place' (p. 19).

The chapters that follow meet the editors stated aim of providing a 'sceptical, research-led antidote to much that is misinformed or misunderstood about the 'new workplace'' (p. vii). Reflecting the diversity within this theme, Danford describes the case of transferring a Japanese firm to Wales in terms of work organisation; a chapter by Taylor focuses on 'emotional labour'; Greenbaum discusses changing labour outcomes in terms of computer systems; Mulholland deals with the reconstitution of management in the privatisation of government utilities, whilst Dent, in the concluding chapter comments on comparative Europe and United States organisational trends in the medical industry.

Whilst the term 'labour process' is oft repeated, the major criticism of the book is that there is no clear unifying common theme. The result is more like a smorgasbord of ideas loosely connected to the stated aim of a presentation of 'some of the core themes of changes in the nature of work itself'.

This led the reviewer to speculate as to what the result may have been if a clearer theme had been enunciated. The theme, as expressed, is too vague. Does not 'some' mean 'one but not all'? Is there not a more basic aspect to change that is universal and, as well, more suited to measurement? What, for example, as an alternative, is the suitability of the concept of complexity? Could not this concept be related to systems and units of systems and applied, generally, historically as well as specifically, to individual industries? Could we not measure complexity in the number of parts contained in a system and in their interaction? Could we not trace and compare the simplicity of the system of the hunter-gatherer to the mastercraftsman- apprentice to the factory system of Ford and Taylor to this modern era?

This is not to imply that the book is not valuable. Indeed it is. It is all too easy to denigrate its value by its apparent lack of coherence, thus overlooking the wisdom contained in its separate contributions. In its stated reversion to a traditionalist approach, attention is drawn to many aspects of the 'shadow' side of the workplace so commonly overlooked. It is with reference to these that future areas of research are indicated. Two contrasting examples are given.

Firstly, Baldry, Bain and Taylor in their chapter titled "'Bright Satanic Offices": Intensification, Control and Team Taylorism' discuss the effect of the physical environment on people and productivity by reference to the sick building syndrome and, in particular, the rise of the 'intelligent building' (p. 166) and its effect on people and productivity. The authors refer to a British study of three 1990s offices chosen 'not specifically because of their work organisation but because workers, unions and/or management felt there was something about the way the building operated that was producing high and repeated levels of ill health complaints and sickness absence' (p. 166).

This discussion of the sick building syndrome may well stimulate others, particularly those with vested interests, to study further the economics, technology and history of the workplace building giving specialist attention to the watershed innovations of the use of windows in factories, and the invention of the elevator and air conditioning making high density high rise offices possible. For example, to the manufacturer of air conditioning systems, overcoming problems of ventilation may only represent a small aberration in the ongoing development of the physical workplace in terms of the people who work in them and in the productivity achieved.

The second example is of a less tangible nature and deals with the changing patterns of the organisation of work itself. In one form or another, at least five of the 11 chapters

are about devolution of responsibility at the workplace. This representation reflects the importance of labour in the productive process viewed within the context of the past, the present and the future. As Milkman says, 'Traditional, top-down forms of organising work have increasingly been criticised in favour of such innovations as employee involvement, quality circles, pay-for-knowledge, multi-skilling and teamwork' (p. 25). Expressed in colloquial terms, currently, to varying degrees, organisations are proceeding from 'top down' patterns to the 'top down-bottom up' approach.

Several contributors refer to the stated aims of management regarding their intentions of devolution and in what results. Milkman, for example, illustrates the gap between rhetoric and practice by citing the introduction of a more participative system at GM-Linden. Here, she says, a 'wide gulf opened up between the managerial rhetoric of participation and the reality of the shop floor' (p. 33). Milkman accounts for this by reference to 'managerial intransigence' (p. 37) and asks the question, 'Can traditionally authoritarian businesses really learn to encourage autonomy and intellectual development among workers?' (p. 32). Whether they can or not, it is useful to learn from this case study and to apply it to matters in other relevant chapters. Evidence submitted in Milkman's chapter suggests that the reason for the 'intransigence' may be twofold—short term production pressures and a misplaced perception by management of the results of devolved and non-devolved power.

Overall, the book achieves its stated aim. It helps to ground us in reality. It does this in a subtle, if not perfect way, by helping us to understand the present by looking to the future. However, as indicated by many of the contributors, we need to know a lot more about the labour process in terms of devolution before we can proceed, in a meaningful way, to meet the demands of the future. As the editors say, 'Powerful forces *have* been reshaping the world of work' these being 'intensified competition within a more global political economy, expanded technological and information resources, new managerial ideologies and practices, and the spread of market relations within the state sector and large private firms' (p. 19).

If not to be overwhelmed by these forces, we need, as a high priority, to address and understand much better management's resistance to devolution. Strategies releasing the untapped potential of employees will follow. Employees are receptive to integrity and competent innovation. As the editors also say, 'For all the hassles and hardships at work, employees at all levels, when and where encouraged to participate and innovate in a climate of trust and reasonable security, welcome real change' (p. 21). This message is most relevant to managers, not only for the positions they hold, but also, for themselves as individuals—because are not managers also employees?

With its liberal referencing, this book is recommended reading for those who recognise, not only the centrality of work, but also the essential part that work plays in our lives.

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### **From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games**

Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Eds)

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The issue of girls and computers has long been a vexed one, raising questions particularly