

## Compte rendu

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*The Realities of Work: Experiencing Work and Employment in Contemporary Society, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.*, by Mike Noon and Paul Blyton, New York: Palgrave, 2007, 436 pp., ISBN 1-4039-9493-5.

par Louise Clarke

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Cette expérience de près de trois ans de l'auteure sur des chantiers de construction est riche d'enseignements et reflète très bien le contenu de l'émission « 60 minutes » présentée par Barbara Walters au tournant du présent siècle.

Cependant, il s'agit d'un témoignage détaillé d'une personne sur certains chantiers de construction du secteur commercial. Les généralisations sont difficiles dans une industrie aussi complexe mais il y a fort à parier que les gens étant ce qu'ils sont, les enseignements de Paap sont beaucoup plus larges que ne le suggèrent les limites habituelles des règles de l'art. Certes, le style de l'auteure est dur et direct. Il

est le reflet fidèle de la réalité sur les chantiers. L'auteure s'en est d'ailleurs excusée d'entrée de jeu. Elle n'avait pas à le faire, sinon par devoir de réserve.

Au total, *Working Construction* est une excellente étude où transpire une profonde connaissance du fonctionnement du secteur de la construction. Ce livre ajoute de façon positive à la trop maigre littérature sur le sujet et a le mérite de se pencher sur un problème caché dans cette industrie, celui du sort qu'on y réserve souvent, directement ou indirectement, aux femmes.

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***The Realities of Work: Experiencing Work and Employment in Contemporary Society, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.,***

by Mike NOON and Paul BLYTON, New York: Palgrave, 2007, 436 pp., ISBN 1-4039-9493-5.

Putting employees at centre stage, *The Realities of Work* seeks to convey their perspectives to business and management students. The purpose, according to the authors, is to assist students to make sense of their own and others' experiences at work by providing the key theories, concepts, and empirical research for critical analysis. The overarching theme is the complexity of the work experience: conflict *and* co-operation, paradox *and* rationality, frustration *and* satisfaction. This theme is an important counterpoint to the unitary, positive perspective often conveyed in management texts.

The book begins with a useful toolkit of concepts, theories, and perspectives for the study of work as well as a "map" of the structure of the book based on a series of clear questions. Indeed, the subsequent explication of a broad range of theory and research is a model of clarity without "dumping down" the material. After presenting an overview of the changing political, economic, and employment contexts of

work, Noon and Blyton move quickly to establish their approach with respect to the meaning of work. There is a moral as well as an instrumental dimension to work; therefore, we must attend to the social construction of work with its resulting plurality of perspectives, some changing and some showing remarkable continuity. The authors counterbalance this constructivist stance with analysis of the materialist structures of capitalist relations of production, gender and race in chapters on time (discipline and fiddling), work skills and their evolution through Fordism, neo-Fordism, and post-Fordism, emotional labour, the "new" knowledge work, workers' survival strategies to cope with alienation, unfair discrimination at work, and representation at work, specifically trade unions. There is also a chapter on the less common topic of hidden work, both concealed and unrecognized, and one on the increasingly important topic of work-life balance. In the conclusion, Noon and Blyton concisely highlight the four key themes that emerge from

all the research (p. 381): (1) The importance of both change and continuity at work; (2) The existence of subcultures that are negotiated alongside formal structures; (3) The presence of worker counter-rationalities to the rationalities of management which are potentially both problematic and indirectly helpful to management; (4) The complexity of work.

While these themes run through all the chapters, some are more important in certain chapters than in others. For example, the change and continuity and complexity themes seem most relevant to the debates on skills (ch. 5), work routines (ch. 6), and knowledge work (ch. 8), in short the heart of the post-industrialism debate. From a managerialist point of view, one is inclined to focus on the changes being implemented. Research on the experience of workers and the theoretical work of sceptical scholars, in contrast, inclines one to see a more nuanced picture, with both continuity and change, and polarization of skills in the same workplace. The themes of sub-cultures and counter rationalities are particularly evident in the chapters on emotional labour (7), survival strategies (9), unfair discrimination (10), representation (11), and work-life balance (13). A notable contribution to all of these chapters is the authors' inclusion of a gender analysis, often missing in mainstream treatments of post-industrialism.

The theoretical sophistication of the book makes it appropriate for graduate students while its clarity makes it suitable, albeit challenging, for upper level undergraduate students. There are helpful teaching devices such as lists of concepts and learning outcomes at the beginning of each chapter (highlighted as appropriate in the chapter) as well as short exercises to stimulate critical

thinking, excerpts from research, and concise summaries of key points. In sum, this is a text that I would very much like to use. While I share the authors' hope that it will be used in a course to broaden the perspective of business/management students, I wonder how many faculties will find room for such a course in curricula packed with technically-oriented courses. The complexity message, combined with no managerial solutions may be a difficult sell in classrooms and a marketplace often looking for (quick) fixes. There may also be reluctance to adopt a British text at non-British institutions, which would be unfortunate since the issues and research covered are very broad-based.

Noon and Blyton have done a very good job of covering the breadth and complexity of the work experience. But, no matter how good a job authors do, one is always tempted to wish for more, especially on one's favourite topics. For example, in the chapter on representation, immigrants and technical/professional employees are mentioned only in excerpts. The social unionism model with its emphasis on mobilizing workers and building national and international networks for social justice, environmental and trade issues is not really mentioned at all. And I find it ironic that, in a text devoted to the perspective of workers, there was little sense—at least for me—of flesh and blood workers, the sometimes overwhelming choices and situations facing people in their working lives, their highs and lows. But, these are more suggestions for next time rather than serious criticisms and I readily recommend this text to faculty in many fields seeking a well researched, coherently presented text on work.

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