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Wilfredo Alvarez

Everyday Dirty Work: Invisibility, Communication, and Immigrant Labor

Columbus, OH, Ohio State University Press, 2022, £27.95 (ISBN: 978-0-8142-5826-2), 194 pp.

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Recently, there has been an increasing visibility and appreciation of the vital social roles undertaken by 'custodian' (Alvarez, 2022:20) and support workers. Some of this has been driven in the public eye by the recent pandemic but has also been built on growing academic awareness of other intersections of work, policy, and society. This includes the need for 'quality' work (Taylor et al, 2017), with the rise of the gig economy, and the functions of stigma as political practice during populist regimes (see Tyler, 2020). Hence, this contribution from Alvarez spotlighting a 'silent' (p.20) *other* university of custodian staff is an important one. Potential dialogue with European audiences is particularly valuable, as it raises our awareness of particular US outcomes from mass and social media framings. The book also fits neatly into growing literature on 'dirty work' (see Ashforth and Kreiner, (1999).

Whilst the stated audience is of communication scholars and organisational leaders (particularly in HE), there is scope to interest a wider variety of academics and practitioners via two main aims. Firstly, of exploring social identity work via intercultural interactions and the lived experiences of migrant workers and their potential applicability to other less-considered workforce groups. Secondly, in raising awareness on conceptualisations of what leadership means in organisations through shedding light onto critical, but often underappreciated staff groups. Emerging sub-themes of social and cultural capital, dominant discourses of inclusion and exclusion, and 'stranger-making' (Butler, 2020) from unfavourable language choices from the privileged are also fruitful.

Drawing from the author's own experiences including learning English on arriving in the US as a teenager and working in a series of campus roles including student, instructor and as participant-observer janitor on campus, Alvarez documents struggles for legitimacy and inclusion at work through a mixture of informant, respondent, and ethnographic interviews, conducted in Spanish to capture participant voices more accurately. Here the book engages well with bureaucratic struggles to create 'welcoming environments' (p.5) for those with limited language fluency and cultural capital through exploration of public discourses of immigrant threat narratives.

Having discussed approach in chapter 1, Alvarez uses chapter 2 to set up his case study as a reflection on workers seen as lower value commodities, before exploring cultural communication issues in chapter 3. Here there is a lively engagement with framings on dirty work, and muted group theory, exploring lived experiences of janitorial staff which are not represented in dominant social groups. Chapter 4 on communicating social identity revisits and updates Bernstein's (1971) seminal work on restricted and elaborated communication codes by social class to a more dynamic and individually-relational approach based on the case study group. Chapter 5 considers outcomes between 'encounters with strangers' (pp.111-125) for immigrants, concluding a burden of responsibility for nondominant groups in social adjustment. Alvarez closes his study with a useful summary of theoretical and practical implications, (the latter at organisational level) as well as some thoughtful insights on positionality and his own negotiated experiences as researcher.

Overall, whilst this book offers a detailed and nuanced account of workplace interactions for one group of marginalised but vital US workers that adds useful insights to a growing debate, I would also have appreciated an additional chapter that explicitly set the study within wider political and social contexts. A drawing together of secondary and tertiary themes threaded in the book about populism, US social and bureaucratic structures, and how such modes of employment have developed over time would have been a welcome inclusion to a well-written contribution.

References

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