
Cremers, J.

Published in:
CLR News

Citation for published version (APA):

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Reviews


**Review by Jan Cremers, Law School Tilburg University**

This book investigates hard work and new and expanding jobs in Europe. The authors note in their introduction that, after having been overshadowed for decades by skilled industrial labour and later on knowledge and creative work, the lower end of the labour market has begun to receive some attention. At all levels of the occupational hierarchy a growth of work pressure, intensification and a-typical employment can be signalled. However, several studies have shown that disadvantages accumulate at the bottom in hard and poor-quality work with low wages, low autonomy, physical and psychological constraints, insecure employment and a lack of workers’ voice.

The researchers examined the quality of jobs, based on a mixture of methods, with quantitative and action research, case studies, interviews and theoretical deliberations. The interrelationship between the labour market and welfare regimes, the quality of work and quality of life is played out at many levels: the institutional level; the organisational level of the company and its customers or clients; the level of everyday life at the workplace and beyond it; and the level of workers' careers and biographies. The book aims to look at the structure and meaning of ‘hard work’ based on an analysis of these interrelationships.

According to the authors, the underlying European project (‘walgüing’) did not achieve all of its aspirations. However, it made practical inroads into several puzzles and paradoxes that are worth documenting and reflecting upon. I share this opinion. All four parts include relevant contributions,
resulting in an impressive overview of thoughts and (new) insights that places this work in an almost forgotten tradition of human relations and the idea that industrial relations are the result of a social construction of reality. In this context, I restrict myself to some observations.

Part I explores the configurations and factors that shape ‘hard work’ on the European level, in European and national sectors, at the level of companies, and the career trajectories and experiences of workers. Changes in employment structures are analysed based on a selection of industries that have witnessed important dynamics of specialisation and professionalization combined with relevant changes in the composition of employment (catering, cleaning, construction, elderly care and waste management). The last two chapters of this section are dedicated to the items of subjective and material well-being.

Part II includes chapters that deal with institutional anchors. The question is raised (in chapter 8) whether social partners can play a role in improving the quality of low-wage and vulnerable work. The author, Vassil Kirov, questions to what extent social partners can neutralise the range of negative consequences of the spatial and functional reorganisation of the sectors viewed that has resulted in in a growth of poor quality, employment instability and fragmentation. He stresses the role of collective bargaining, having a say over working time, training and skill upgrading. Chapter 9 is dedicated to the important (and sometimes neglected) role that public procurement can play.

In part III (chapter 10) the authors resume, by using EU statistics on income and living conditions, that workers with problematic working conditions, temporary contracts, low wages and disjointed careers also report higher deprivation in terms of income, commodities and living conditions. It is mostly blue-collar workers, the low-educated, migrants and younger workers and those living in the Southern or Eastern EU countries that are affected. Prevailing divisions of labour in households and unequal gender relations supported by welfare
state arrangements that amount to varying ‘gender regimes’, leave women and migrants or ethnic minorities with limited labour market options, and thus provide employers with workforces that accept various forms of atypical and poor-quality employment. Even in countries with a well-established social dialogue, there may be gaps in implementation: sectors dominated by subcontracting, small businesses, groups of (recent) immigrants, or the proliferation of exit options for employers through separate regulations for particular employment contracts or groups of workers.

The two chapters of the final Part IV try to pay more attention to the social relations at work; these relations can neither be replaced by market transactions nor simply utilised by the managerial shaping of companies’ cultures. Attention is given to the traditional role of the labour movement in its struggle for redistribution and recognition, often resulting in material and non-material compensation for lower-ranked work. This form of ‘appreciation’ also compensates for a lack of human autonomy.