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Ruth Simpson, Natasha Slutskaya, Patricia Lewis, Heather Höpfl, "Dirty work. Concept and identities". Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 274 pp.

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Book reviews

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This book does not offer an assessment of the concept of “dirty work”, developed by Everett C. Hughes and widely used over the last fifty years, but rather it presents a range of uses and interpretations of the concept itself. Thirteen contributions attempt to renew, specify or deepen the use of “dirty work”, by showing the diversity of its contemporary uses. Indeed, the book’s value lies in the areas of research it deals with. Even though the chapters consistently differ from each other, most of the fieldwork investigations analyzed in the book focus on gender, sexuality and various activities at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

In this regard, Hughes’ work, and especially the concept of “dirty work”, is often considered as gender blind. However, this oversight has been largely erased for decades. In this book, instead, gender is particularly problematized: no less than eight contributions use it predominantly. According to the authors, this importance is related to the link between stigmatized occupational groups and gender [chapter 10]. Selmi [chapter 7] asserts that there is a gender specific dirtiness, which could also be made invisible by the sex of the workers as naturally associated with feminine or masculine qualities. The gender also appears as a “key discursive resource” in the management of taint, and the way to attribute meanings. When some tasks can be associated with qualities socially constructed as masculine or feminine, it is easy to reframe it. Conversely, some menial and even dangerous tasks may appear dirtier when they are made by men or by women. This work confirms, following others (on butchers, nurses, etc.), that the socially situated constructions of masculinity and femininity can redefine the idea of dirty work. In Chapter 10, for example, Simpson et al. clearly show how male nurses mobilize this type of quality to claim a heroic posture and distinctive space.

Moreover, for a long time “dirty work” has been claimed to affect jobs at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In the literature, but also in this book, this concept in fact is often used to refer to less prestigious occupations (janitors, meat cutters, slaughterhouse workers, prostitute, jail guards, etc.). Sex shop employees, exotic dancer, phone sex workers, nurse, etc., confirm this trend in this book, and all those examples introduce the questionable relationship between dirty work, the occupations at the bottom of the social ladder and women. However, this interpretation goes against the original analysis made by Hughes, who tried to understand how a group develops “prestige scale” for tasks performed daily. Notwithstanding the uses which has been made of it over time, this concept should be used for all occupational groups. In this book, the authors wanted to exceed the boundaries between “modest occupations and pretentious professions” to identify common mechanisms to all work activities, because all workers, including those of the most prestigious groups, have tasks they prefer to avoid or not to talk about. In some cases, the concept of dirty work even means an activity as a whole, defined a priori and by a vision imposed by the observer. The risk of these approaches is then to identify

the actor as a dirty worker, while some of these analyzes show that these actors do not consider themselves as such. The stigmatization of some occupational groups thus coincides with the dirty work. McMurray [chapter 8] offers an interesting analysis to resolve this impasse. He considers that the dirty work is defined by what is imposed and he uses this concept as an analyzer of power relations between occupations. It is “the dirty work that defines relations between occupations and which would render nurses subservient to that most significant occupational other: medicine” [p. 131]. So the dirty work is what is avoided by others and is defined by the servility which binds groups to each other.

In a general attempt to analyze all occupational groups, the contribution of Stanley and Mackenzie-Davey [chapter 4] on the investment bankers demonstrates the concept's importance. The image of investment banks has been highly upset in recent years, and the group of investment bankers is now stigmatized. The authors propose an innovative approach to the study of prestigious professions centred around three points: an “accommodating and individualistic rather than a collectivised approach to taint management, encompassing the taint surrounding behaviours and values as well as task and job content, and allowing for development in the nature, direction and strength of reaction to taint” [p. 50]. So they are more interested in taint construction process, and how it is allocated and contested. However, the question remains: who defines the dirty job? Is it the workers, the sociologists or the “society”?

It is this ambiguity that comes to be revealed by Tyler [chapter 5] in a research on sex shops' employees in SoHo, New York, showing the contingent nature of the dirty work. The dirtiness may indeed have an attractive side, as the opportunity for women to play with gender. More paradoxically, one can even observe a dialectical phenomenon of repulsion and attraction. This comprehensive approach shows that the dirty work can not be reduced to the nature of the tasks, but to the prospect associated with them. But this is a difficult exercise of social constructionism: “in constructing a single account I have subjected the story of nursing and its relations to medicine to the violent external imposition of experts who propose to speak on behalf of others [...]. The very act of writing imposes a sense of staticity, fixity and concreteness on an ever-changing world [...]. Writing is necessarily a simplifying device that is all too crude in its grouping of experiences, motives and actions according to broad and objectifying occupations” [pp. 140-141].

It is impossible here to exhaustively identify all the paths taken by the authors of this book, however, we should note the variety of approaches. These many ways raise the risk of losing the unity of the concept and therefore its interest. This book should be considered as an asset, a step before others. Moreover, if the reading of this book is challenging, it also has its limits. First of all, the book does not take into consideration the mechanisms of delegation which are the basis of Hughes' analysis of work: actors designate some of their tasks as dirty work and at the same time they try to delegate others, as it is the case for nurses and caregivers. The concept of dirty work should be used in order to understand, in a situation of conflict between occupational groups, how they are implementing series of actions to preserve what they see as the heart of their activity. Here the authors' interest is focused on the process of identity management aimed at finding strategies for the social actors to clean themselves from the stigma and reframe both their identity and their work in a positive way. In most of the book, the

authors have tried to identify what kind of resources are mobilized to resist or endure, even if it should be noted that the socially situated dimension of dirty work could have been more consistently highlighted.

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