

A kaleidoscope of work

Forty-four testimonials covering so many different situations. Aicha is a teacher in a youth centre; Bruno is doing research in neuroscience; Vanessa, now unemployed, worked as a quality controller for more than fifteen years in a brake factory before it was closed down by its German management; Nathan is now a social worker at a radio station after starting work there as a doorkeeper/caretaker. The whole palette of life at work today is to be found in this book by Nicolas Latteur, in so many different hues: the pleasure gained from one's work, the bonds of solidarity, the recognition, the overcoming of a loss of confidence, or, on the other hand, contempt, racism, sexism, diseases and accidents. Without forgetting the innumerable forms of struggle, those many levels of resistance and dignity pervading our daily work help make it more human, giving it a dimension other than that desired by the bosses.

With this summary limited to just one page, I am having to make hard choices on which cases to mention. What about Elsa? After suffering harassment, she turned to union work. Her engagement links feminism with working class consciousness. "Why can't women be delegates as well, thereby changing the game." This is exactly what has happened, and she is now seeing changes: "I can't bear to hear a man speaking badly to a woman. So I'll put him in his place, saying to him: *First, you speak to her properly, she's not an object; and second you apologise.* We used to have to intervene a lot like that. But now our strength lies in being delegates, and all of a sudden they pay attention."

A lift maintenance worker, Ernesto knows all about work-related risks: a working environment full of dust, draughts, tight working spaces, the permanent gap between book procedures and work reality which engenders stress. He is observing company pressure for changes in the occupational identity of lift maintenance workers. While the latter want to put their expert know-how

at the service of lift users and their safety, management wants to turn them into salesmen, selling new installations or maintenance contracts, a number of which are nothing more than customer rip-offs. Concluding his testimonial, he says that he won't be able to do this work after the age of 55. "When people start working here, they're quite slender. You see them going to the gym and building up their muscles. But it's very hard working alone, constantly in damp places, in unfinished buildings. In the field of maintenance and repair work, technicians find it very hard to keep on going until retirement due to the pressure of getting a job done in the allotted time, and the ever-increasing workload due to extended customer rounds. As people leaving the company are not replaced, their customer rounds are split between several workers."

Nicolas Latteur explains the political thrust of his project as a collective and democratic repossession of work. Work constantly involves weighing up policies, he tells us, whether we're talking about the fight against occupational cancers, collective restructuring measures or the use of night work. None of this is unavoidable. We do have choices. Though the narrative itself cannot ensure the right conditions for democracy, it is the precondition for any self-organisation.

We can thus read this book in different tenses. For instance, that of listening to testimonials focused on concrete activities, exploring the many facets of a work which has nothing to do with that portrayed in annual company reports. While each of these testimonials, condensed into a 7-8 page text, stands alone, together they give rise to a more overarching reflection, drawing a dynamic picture – just as successive frames create a film. This reflection feeds on the conclusions presented by the author – very justifiably – in a separate section. Such distance is valuable, as it does not *a priori* detract from the force of the testimonials. It is not a "lesson" illustrated by examples. Its purpose is to open

the debate and to be open to debate. It questions the power balance between the experts (whether scientists or policymakers) and the world of work. The book is rounded off by brief afterword by Sophie Bérout (Lumière University Lyon 2), positioning the book in the context of sociology and political reflection on unionism.

The book's quality lies in the multiple intelligences deployed by the author. As a sociologist and union trainer, he puts across abstract notions on exploitation and domination using direct and simple language. His investigation is like a work of revelation, visualising the collective intelligence of the world of work, making everyday working life the starting point and finish of politics. The verbatim accounts of working conditions provide a pleasure similar to listening to someone tell their story. Yet this immediate perception is backed up by structuring questions which rest as much on an ability to analyse as on a commitment to fight. It is exactly these questions which allow us to incorporate each of these unique stories from today's world of work into an overarching emancipation project putting work back into its rightful place at the heart of the balance of power.

— Laurent Vogel

Travailler aujourd'hui. Ce que révèle la parole des salariés

Nicolas Latteur,
Cuesmes, éditions du
Cerisier, 2017

From the same author:
**Le travail, une question
politique**
Brussels, éditions Aden,
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