Class, gender and ethnic relations on London's building sites

How do you get into the building trades? It requires a high level of skill, mostly acquired informally. It is learned not so much in the classroom as through experience, from knowledge passed on by other workers, from the actual content of work kept at a discreet remove from what bosses think it is. It is an industry where job identities are high-inseparable from the gender and ethnic divisions of labour. Women building workers are few and far between in Western Europe. There are sharp ethnic divisions, too, although varying greatly between countries. Darren Thiel's book looks at how class, gender and ethnicity play into one another in the construction industry.

The author worked for seven years more or less continually as a painter and decorator before going on to study for a PhD in sociology and ethnography. Many of his family worked in the construction industry. He spent a year doing participant observation on a big central London construction site refurbishing three huge run-down National Health Service buildings. At the same time as working, Darren Thiel recorded 31 detailed interviews. Many workers interviewed were not overly forthcoming.

Where this book really wins out is in the author's keen sense of observation and exceptional ability to describe working conditions in the workers' own language. The interplay between the workers' own words and the language of scholarly description itself becomes a rich source of knowledge. It paints a picture of a culture marked by a powerful sense of identification with the trade and its dignity as well as fight-back strategies both through language and practices: they describe the world, forge ties of complicity and solidarity. They speak of ways of tackling exploitation that are often belittled and disparaged (like acts of time banditry). The perpetuation of these practices relies on mutual trust, resulting in strong pressure from the workforce to get rid of "grasses" from sites.

The main scope of study focuses on the contrast between managing "in the office" and physical work "on the tools", the relationship between work, recreation and their respective timeframes, the relationship between job identity and masculinity, the materiality of long subcontracting chains and the informal organization of this sector of the economy. The backdrop to all aspect of the research is provided by a ubiquitous ethnic division of labour.

The author does not look in detail at site safety and health. He points up the huge gap between worksite and office, where the health and safety officer's main concern is to write up documents to cover the firm against prosecution for serious accidents. The book includes a picture that speaks volumes: a Health and Safety Executive poster plastered with lewd pictures.

The book offers much food for thought about the part played by force and cultural adhesive in the exploitation of workers. The singular characteristics of building work offer many ways of fighting back. There is much less scope for controlling workers' activity through overseers or by computerized systems than in factory work. To restore a balance of power in their favour, employers have developed extreme forms of contingency. Long subcontracting chains create a division of labour by specialised trade. Each trade has the hallmarks of an ethnic niche with sub-bosses from the same community and members living in ethnically-bound geographical areas of London. They are often paid cash in hand.

The ethnic division of labour generates complex control mechanisms based both on elements of common culture (same origin, religion and language), forms of solidarity and situations of brutality and violence. It is a breeding ground for distrust and even racism between groups in a climate of increased competition. The construction of masculinity is also analyzed by the author, who notes that masculine bodies are both sources of labour power sold by builders in the marketplace and also sources of power in interpersonal relationships.

The bibliography is limited to literature published in English. The author nevertheless emphasises the paucity of sociological study of the building industry both in Britain and the United States. A comparison of his observations with sociological studies published in other countries could have been highly instructive. Sadly, this is a common limitation of English language scientific output.

— Laurent Vogel


