

Safety or profit? That is the question

1973: two young British sociologists, Peter Armstrong and Theo Nichols, publish the pamphlet entitled 'Safety or profit?'

It is a short, controversial text that gets right to the heart of the matter. Its brevity and clear language demonstrate an understanding of the reality that goes far beyond the vast majority of similar academic publications of that era. Most books on accidents in the workplace written 40 years ago can rest undisturbed on the library shelves. 'Safety or profit?', however, is surprisingly relevant today.

It was written in a very specific context. In the United Kingdom, the Robens Committee had just published a Report on Safety and Health at Work, which called for self-regulation and voluntary initiatives.

According to Alfred Robens, health and safety was an interest shared by both employers and workers, outside the tensions of industrial relations. It was impossible to deny the existence of accidents and sickness, however. Robens attributed them to 'apathy'. This concept, which should explain everything, was reminiscent of the melancholia diagnosed by Hippocrates. The Robens Report continues to act as a reference point for the laws of numerous countries.

Forty years later, various authors offer us a collection of case studies that apply the 1973 analytical framework to the world of work today. The common thread is that injuries and sickness caused by work are not accidental events. They are the result of work organisation and work structures. The pursuit of profit also involves power relationships and a division of work between planners and implementers. If the producers had complete control over the production process, what legitimacy would there be in the owners of

the capital expropriating the product of their work? A loss of control over working conditions leads to a pathogenic organisation of production. In this context, accidents, sickness and psychological problems are collateral damage that is as inevitable as the death of civilians during a war.

The book takes the reader from Australia to Canada via Sweden and the United Kingdom. It reiterates the initial theoretical framework put forward by Nichols and Armstrong.

Karen Messing and Katherine Lippel demonstrate the importance of a feminist critique of the policies and practices governing health at work. This contribution is particularly important for European policy, which leans towards what is known as a 'risk-based approach'. In actual fact, this would create huge inequalities because it is impossible to separate the devaluation of women's work from the stereotypes that female jobs involve fewer risks than male jobs.

Michael Quinlan develops the analysis of precarious forms of employment as a vulnerable structure. This is a common concept that provides a better understanding of very disparate phenomena: subcontracting, immigration, temporary work.

Charles Woolfson establishes a link between health at work and the environment by analysing two disasters at offshore oil rigs: Piper Alpha in 1988 and Deepwater Horizon in 2010. He explores this enigma: how can such disasters happen at companies using highly advanced technologies, such as the multinational BP?

Steve Tombs and David Whyte examine the British policy between 1997 and 2010. Under the leadership of Tony Blair, the Labour Party reached a turning point. Its new priority was to reduce the regulatory burden on

employers. It thus launched the 'better regulation' concept that, some years later, would eventually paralyse the development of European legislation.

A brief review cannot reflect the full richness of a book. We can only hope that it will convince our readers that it is urgent, and beneficial, reading. This book guards against fatalism. Accidents and sickness do not happen because there is too large a gap between ambitious rules and practice. The rules themselves need to be reviewed. Their inefficiency is to be expected because they circumvent the fundamental problem of the imbalance of power in businesses and in society.

—Laurent Vogel

Safety or Profit?
International Studies in
Governance, Change and
the Work Environment

Edited by Theo Nichols &
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Baywood Publishing
Company, 2013, 256 p.