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Recensions / Book Reviews

Finding a Voice at Work? New Perspectives on Employment Relations

By Stewart Johnstone and Peter Ackers,
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In their edited volume, *Finding a Voice at Work? New Perspectives on Employment Relations*, Johnstone and Ackers (2015) present 13 chapters, including their introduction, on the complex and protean topic of contemporary employee voice. Taken together, these chapters provide a comprehensive treatment of a conceptually nebulous and operationally diverse phenomenon that divides opinion among academics and policy makers alike. *Finding a Voice at Work?* sheds considerable light how voice and related concepts (e.g. engagement) are defined and measured, and what researchers have been able to show about the varying effects of alternative arrangements that at least putatively involve employees in the affairs of the their employing organizations. From the rich treatments of diverse, but cognate, forms of employee "voice", we gain a much greater appreciation of the potential that voice mechanisms might have to offer added value, the deficit between organizational initiatives that claim or infer voice and what occurs in reality, and the different lens or "frames" through which the propriety of alternative employee voice mechanisms are viewed. As Johnstone and Ackers (2016) assert in their introductory chapter, employee voice may be viewed on a nonlinear continuum that ranges from largely neoliberal management-driven forms of employee engagement to worker control, as advocated by academics and policy makers who take a more radical view. They conclude that if one's "frame" is that genuine voice depends on an independent and formalized method for employees to share in decision making at some level,

then "it is hard not to be pessimistic about certain voice trends if they continue" (Johnstone and Ackers, 2015: 15).

This volume is carved into four sections to address different aspects of the vexing question or problem of providing employees with a voice *vis-à-vis* employees. The first section includes three chapters (Heely, 2015; Guest, 2015; and Greene, 2015) that address questions of conceptualization, analysis, and application. Heely (2015) offers the analytical "frames of reference" as a means of evaluating disparate approaches to introducing a voice into the workplace, with the frames including the unitary, pluralist, and critical (or radical) perspectives. Guest (2015) discusses how the voguish phenomenon of employee engagement is subject to different conceptualizations (attitudinal, behavioral, and organizational) and often falls far short, both conceptually and operationally, in offering a voice. Greene (2015) emphasizes that, unfortunately, employee voice initiatives and historical practices often are based on an outmoded prototype of the workforce that fails to account for diversity along demographic (gender, race, age) and employment-relationship lines (with the latter referring to the fact that many full-time employees in the workforce perform low-skill jobs for which voice is often not intended, and that there is a large and growing body of the workforce that is contingently tied to the workplace on a part-time or temporary basis or as free lancers and independent contractors).

Section 2 includes three articles on union voice, which take different perspectives on how such a mechanism is best practiced. Ackers (2015) examines trade unions as professional associations as an alternative to more radical conceptualizations that might view the union voice as most meaningfully occurring through general worker organizations. Simms (2015) argues that efforts to provide a union voice through labour-management partnerships are inherently flawed given what Thompson (2003)

describes as the prevalence of “disconnected capitalism.” Simms (2015: 149) asserts that: “the financialization of corporate decision making makes it difficult for managers to keep their ‘bargains’ with workers because of the constant risk and threat of restructuring or disinvestment.” Johnstone (2015) responds by making the case for workplace partnership as a legitimate form of employee voice.

The third section of the volume includes four chapters that address “European Models and Varieties of Capitalism”. Samuel and Bacon (2015) examine experimentation with social partnerships in Scotland and Wales that resulted from indigenous pressures to devolve power within England. Gold and Artus (2015) discuss the often lauded German model of employee voice, observing that there has been an erosion and hollowing of both works councils and collective bargaining in that coordinated economy. Timming and Whittail (2015) and Dobbins and Dundon (2015) discuss the European works councils 20 years after the *Council of European Union’s Directive 94/45/EC* and the experience with the European Union information and consultative directive in the UK, respectively. The EU-wide efforts fall short of offering a genuine voice, with Dobbins and Dundon (2015: 257) concluding that such directives in neoliberal economies such as the UK and Ireland have “redistributed insufficient power to employees and their representatives, thereby limiting potential for collaborative knowledge sharing.”

Section 4 looks ahead, presenting two chapters on what the future holds for employee voice. Hyman (2015) offers a trade union perspective, while Kaufmann (2015) presents an employee relations model of voice and applies it to the United States. Both Hyman (2015) and Kaufmann (2015) are pessimistic about what the future holds, unless fundamental change occurs at a societal level. Real employee voice is difficult to achieve as long as neolib-

eralism dominates, leading Hyman (2015: 273) to argue that “To defend employees at workplace level and no less within the national...political economy requires a confrontation with the dominant policy logic of our age.”

As a whole, these chapters permit several general conclusions. First, employee voice is an imprecisely defined and varying operationalized phenomenon, which complicates drawing generalizations across studies that have different definitions and measurements. Second, the “frames of reference” framework provides a useful device to evaluate the effect and value of alternative voice mechanisms. Third, with the rise of neoliberal economies and the decline of unions, the prevalence of bilaterally negotiated forms of voice have given way to management-centric forms of involvement which have tenuous mechanisms for an independent employee voice to be asserted. Fourth, partnerships at various levels—workplace, organizational, and societal—offer opportunities to expand the realm of employee voice, particularly through representatives (i.e. trade unions). Such partnerships, however, are preconditioned on acceptance of the legitimacy of a union role, which is often lacking in certain neoliberal economies, such as the US. Finally, if one takes an economy-wide view, the situation looks gloomy across the globe and within advanced industrial economies. An increasing share of the workforce is contingent and beyond the reach of traditional voice mechanisms that require employment status and physical presence; women and minorities still face ceilings and barriers, which carry over into voice mechanisms; and lower skilled workers may not be on the radar screen when it comes to introducing voice.

In conclusion, this is an excellent volume. It provides a comprehensive and rich treatment of a complex and value-laden subject. It offers diverse perspectives and insights, which provoke important critical thinking.

In addition, the volume serves its purpose of bringing the topic to the fore of academic and public attention. Last, the “frames of reference” thread that weaves the chapters together underscores vividly the importance of having an explicit framework of analysis when examining the topic of employee voice.

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L'activité en théories.

Regards croisés sur le travail

Dirigé par Marie-Anne Dujarier, Corinne Gaudart, Anne Gillet et Pierre Léné (2016)
Toulouse : Octarès Éditions, 264 pages.

ISBN : 978-2-36630-055-0.

Les théories sur 'l'activité', dont les racines philosophiques se trouvent dans la pensée de Karl Marx, s'inscrivent dans un courant interdisciplinaire ayant pour ancêtres les représentants de la psychologie culturelle russe des années 1930, soit Lev Vygotsky, Alexis Leontiev et Alexandre Luria. Après la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, ces théories se sont développées à l'intérieur de la psychologie comportementale et des sciences cognitives. Elles connaissent un premier regain d'intérêt au cours des années 1980 et, un deuxième, à partir du milieu des années 2000, à la suite des métamorphoses du monde du travail induites par les nouvelles formes d'activité communicationnelles et relationnelles qui ont suscité un intérêt renouvelé pour « le travail en acte ». Malgré cette longue ascendance, les théories de l'activité, leurs racines et les travaux produits par ce courant de pensée demeurent très fragmentés et mal connus, notamment dans le monde francophone.

Réunissant la contribution de neuf chercheurs en provenance de plusieurs universités françaises, cet ouvrage, dirigé par Dujarier, Gaudart, Gillet et Léné, est issu d'un colloque organisé en avril 2014 au Conservatoire national des arts et métiers (CNAM), et il constitue la première synthèse

en langue française qui nous offre l'opportunité de connaître les nouveaux développements et les perspectives de recherche sur 'l'activité'. Concept polysémique, qui réfère à « ce que font les travailleurs », l'activité est actuellement mobilisée principalement par les ergonomes, les psychologues cliniciens et, marginalement, par les sociologues du travail, notamment dans leurs analyses de la distinction entre *tâche* et *activité*.

« À quoi nous sert l'activité pour comprendre le travail ? », voici la question qui donne matière aux réflexions contenues dans cet ouvrage qui se propose « d'expliquer de façon pédagogique des théories et des débats pluridisciplinaires sur l'activité », et s'adresse « à des spécialistes du travail qui cherchent à repérer, comprendre et articuler la diversité théorique des approches » (p. 10). La pluridisciplinarité caractérise la structure de l'ouvrage. Les auteurs des chapitres appartiennent à des disciplines variées : l'ergonomie (Corinne Gaudart), l'ergologie (Yves Schwartz), la psychologie (Yves Clot et Christophe Dejourné), la psychosociologie (Dominique Lhuillier), la sociologie (Alexandra Bidet, Anni Borzeix, Marie-Anne Dujarier et Gilbert de Terssac), l'économie (François Vatin), et ils inscrivent leurs analyses dans des traditions intellectuelles différentes, allant du marxisme au pragmatisme américain, de l'ethnométhodologie à l'interactionnisme et à la psychologie clinique. Cette diversité disciplinaire et de traditions intellectuelles, qui constitue l'une des forces de l'ouvrage, illustre, en même temps, la fragmentation du travail scientifique consacré à l'activité.

La structure du livre comporte huit chapitres, outre une introduction et une riche conclusion. Chacun des chapitres tente de répondre à des problématiques transversales qui ont été établies par les coordonnateurs de l'ouvrage et transmises comme consigne de rédaction aux auteurs. Ces problématiques concernent : 1-la clarification des concepts mobilisés ; 2-les théories du sujet adossées à l'approche de l'acti-