

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



The Fissured Workplace: Why Work Became So Bad for So Many and What Can Be Done to Improve It by David Weil,
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014, 424 pages.
ISBN: 978-0674725447.

Sean O'Brady

Volume 69, numéro 3, été 2014

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1026766ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1026766ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

O'Brady, S. (2014). Compte rendu de [*The Fissured Workplace: Why Work Became So Bad for So Many and What Can Be Done to Improve It* by David Weil, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014, 424 pages. ISBN: 978-0674725447.] *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 69(3), 655–657.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1026766ar>

Tous droits réservés © Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval, 2014

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

é
rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

However, there is another dimension of fairness that Van Parijs considers important. It is what he calls "parity of esteem": members of linguistic communities are entitled to equal respect and have the right to promote their identities. What he proposes is an arrangement based on linguistic territoriality, whereas communities can impose their domestic languages in their own institutions, while still using English for external communications. Of course, this may not be possible for all linguistic groups, but those that are strong enough and have the resources can do it.

The author's reflection is carried mainly in the context of the European Union, where twenty-three languages now have an official status, but where the expanding domination of English has become a common source of frustration. He argues that this frustration is misplaced, both in Europe and in the rest of the world. There is very little discussion in the book of the case of Canada, but I think that there may be some interesting implications. There are two official languages in Canada, with one of them being the international *lingua franca*. Official bilingualism is the norm, but in reality English is used a lot more than French in the federal government and other national institutions. This used to be due to a large extent to the inferior status of the French Canadians, but it is no longer the case. Even if a lot of French Canadians have made it to the top, the international supremacy of English makes the position of the French language still fragile. In that context, the decision of the Quebec government to impose French on its territory, as opposed to official bilingualism as some would have liked, makes sense and it is consistent with the author's recommendation.

One quality of the book is that it tackles in a rational way issues that are sometimes emotional. I would personally disagree with the view that the spreading of English should be accelerated. The trend is already

strong enough. I would rather say that we must take advantage of a common *lingua franca*, but that its expansion must be kept under control. The book provides an interesting argument that the worldwide use of English is not incompatible with linguistic diversity.

Gilles Grenier

Professor

Department of Economics

University of Ottawa

The Fissured Workplace: Why Work Became So Bad for So Many and What Can Be Done to Improve It

by David Weil, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014, 424 pages.

ISBN: 978-0674725447.

A "seismic shift in the focus of employment" has taken place. David Weil's book describes this shift through the concept of fissuring, that is, businesses' shedding of work done internally to subsidiary organizations, a dynamic that has fundamentally transformed the employment relationship for many workers. Motivated by strategic concerns pertaining to a focus on core competencies and cost-cutting, lead businesses have used subcontracting, franchising, and supply chain management as means of absolving themselves from the responsibilities inherent to managing their workforces. As a consequence, greater numbers of workers have experienced marked declines in wages, benefits, health and safety conditions, and in their share of wealth creation.

According to Weil, this is so because fissured workplaces operate under different pressures than do lead businesses. Subsidiary organizations often operate under tight margins and strict guidelines that make poor pay and working conditions a precondition to solvency. So how have fissured workplaces manifested themselves over the course of the twentieth century? This question is largely addressed in Part 1 of the book. Weil describes how vertically inte-

grated businesses dominated the market in the latter part of the 19th and early 20th centuries. In this period, capturing economies of scale through large-scale production facilities, sophisticated market and distribution networks, and the development of a “centralized management structure” dedicated to coordinating production and distribution were the key to success. However, this traditional business model came under fire as savvy institutional investors, growing private equity firms, and the rise of performance-based executive pay incentivized firms to seek out greater profits by radically restructuring their organizations. And thanks to the falling costs of managing information through technological innovations such as the computer, these companies could shed responsibility for their workforces while exercising considerable control over production by setting standards.

An impressive account of how the strategy of fissuring workplaces has been executed by some of America’s most prominent companies is the subject of Part 2. AT&T subcontracts the building and maintenance of its cell towers to Nsoro LLC Inc., who then acts like a project manager by hiring and coordinating an amalgam of crews to service the towers. This arrangement, known as the “turf system”, is fundamentally flawed for lacking a single authority with overall responsibility for the health and safety of workers on a site. Coverall provides its franchisees with detailed operating procedures and a royalty/fee structure that makes it nearly impossible for a franchise to be profitable without cutting corners in meeting the minimum legislative standards for managing the compensation and hours of its workers. Apple and Hewlett Packard contract Foxconn to build their electronics products while distancing themselves from the deplorable working conditions and the high suicide levels at Foxconn’s plants. Each of these cases illustrates fissuring in practice, as well as its associated impacts on workers.

Part 3 maps the way forward by proposing a public policy agenda for “mending the fissured workplace”. Weil discusses the mishmash of laws defining employers and employees, and suggests that measures be introduced to enforce lead businesses’ liability for employees affiliated with aspects of production and distribution that are under their control, whether or not they are directly employed. Since the current political climate does not invite such change, however, Weil argues that a focus on the enforcement of current laws and regulations is needed. This includes focussing on lead firms which are found by mapping business relationships within a sector, increasing the probability of inspection, tracking worst offenders, and pushing for corporate-wide settlement agreements, among others. Weil also explains how unions, employer associations, and other organizations need to create a climate fostering worker voice, not only to increase compliance through higher complaint rates, but to create a form of civic life that alters perceptions of what minimum working conditions are acceptable. The book ends with a discussion of how fissuring has spread to higher income professions such as law and journalism. There is also specific mention of how fissuring has been a contributing factor to rises in income inequality and lagging economic recoveries.

What makes this book particularly interesting is how it integrates the labour problems associated with subcontracting, franchising, and supply chain management into a cohesive framework and provides an overarching set of recommendations to solve them. Contrary to scholars who treat these organizational forms in isolation, Weil shows how they are related, and how shifting our focus to the strategic regulation of key firms could make a significant difference to the lives of many workers within and outside of the United States. Of particular interest is Weil’s use of the “broken windows” notion in Chapter 10 which draws parallels between community

policing and workplace regulation. The broken windows analogy argues that one broken window, if unfixed, is suggestive of social decline within the community and welcomes further damage. This is compared to the workplace in which small misdemeanors, such as paying employees off the books or verbal abuses, can escalate to large-scale violations if worker voice is thwarted vis-à-vis the workplace. However, educating employees of their rights and building relationships between regulatory enforcers, community organizations, unions, religious organizations, and workers is presented as a solution to the current deleterious state of employer's compliance. This is fascinating because it ties Weil's research with the growing scholarly interest in the role of union coalitions with civil society actors in regulating workplace change. It also captures the essence of a root cause of regulatory failure.

I would recommend this book to students, researchers, and practitioners for its strengths on so many levels. First, while the book presents some interesting and novel arguments at the cutting-edge of industrial relations research, the multitude of case-studies contained would benefit even those seeking an introductory understanding of how prominent global companies, franchises, subcontractors, and other employers organize employment. Second, the fissured workplaces argument has important implications for challenges such as union decline, the social regulation of multinationals, and others. Finally, practitioners could benefit from the practical insights concerning workplace regulation discussed earlier. In fact, since Weil has recently been confirmed as the new US Wage and Hour Administrator in the United States' Department of Labor, it will be fascinating to see whether and how these recommendations translate into practice.

Sean O'Brady

Doctoral Student
Université de Montréal

Voice and Whistleblowing in Organizations: Overcoming Fear, Fostering Courage and Unleashing Candour

edited by Ronald J. Burke and Cary L. Cooper. CBE, Cheltenham, United Kingdom of Great Britain : Edward Elgar editions, 2013, 374 pages. ISBN : 978-1-78100-591-0.

This collection of fourteen articles examines the question of voice and whistleblowing in organizations, particularly in regard of the decision making process underlying the choice to speak up or to keep silent. The authors examine the theory and research addressing this phenomenon by covering the principal issues such as: the role of courage and fear, confidence, transparency and leadership. This book positions the scientific progress in investigating voice and whistleblowing and contains suggestions for new research avenues and to develop the tools necessary for encouraging an «ethic» of both individual and organizational health. Rigorously written, the fourteen chapters are distributed into five parts which, despite some redundancies, succeed in giving a quite robust account of the phenomenon of voice and whistleblowing in organizations.

The first part of the book (chapters one, two and three) outlines the major issues and discussions in the field. In the first chapter, Ronald J. Burke has written a long and condensed chapter in which he presents mainly a review of the principal issues surrounding the phenomenon of voice. Using examples, Burke demonstrates how voice is a key aspect of organizational performance and psychological health of individuals in organizations, and how those questions of courage and fear are a part of the phenomenon. The two key questions the book poses are: "What are the individual, motivational, and organizational factors that help or hinder voice in organizations?" and, "What psychological processes are involved in the decision to express one's voice?"