



## Book review

# Nancy Harding (2013): *On Being At Work. The Social Construction of the Employee*. Routledge: New York and London

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Harding's aim is to develop a 21<sup>st</sup> century theory of what it means to be at work. Using her own words this book is "located within a sociocultural philosophical framework that incorporates Judith Butler's work and that of several lay philosophers, develops a theory of the damage caused to individuals because of the power of organizations to impose their desires upon staff, thus ignoring, suppressing, stunting, frustrating or killing the desires of people, who ... go to work to do more than labour" (p. 144).

With this review I would like to bring you closer to Harding's thoughts outlined in her recent book. I shed some light on the steps taken to develop the theory, its various shades, and the works of Judith Butler and other theorists that Harding uses in order to make this knowledge productive for organization and management studies. Rather than providing a summarized overview of the main arguments of the book, in this review I turn to each of the seven chapters in order to grasp at least some of the richness and complexity of the book.

In Chapter 1 Harding builds on Butler's (2009) "Frames of War" and on an account of Julie, Harding's sister, who during the time of the interview worked as a caretaker. Harding argues that we need to distinguish between labor and work. Labor for her "involves the tasks that are done as a means of sustaining life or [and this is the focus of her book, IW] fulfilling the conditions of one's job" (p. 21). In contrast, work "encompasses workplace possibilities, over and above labouring, of constituting selves recognised as human" (p. 21). Harding claims that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, engaging in paid work constitutes the primary means through which people aspire to develop their self, hence becoming recognized as a human being. However, the organizations, in which people do the paid work, reduce workers to their organizational role and thereby restrict the possibilities of who one might be. While engaging in paid work, people are required to become what Harding calls "zombie machines", not full human beings but a labor force, which is supposed to exclusively think, feel, and act for the purpose of the organization.

In Chapter 2, Harding introduces the reader to a manager and business owner, called Frank. She weaves Frank's account through Butler's (1997) "The Psychic Life of Power" in order to come closer to what she calls a theory of managerial subjectivities. In so doing, she introduces the manager into the four acts of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic, thus rereading Butler rereading Hegel. From Harding's point of view the organization takes the position of the master, who the manager subjects to (i.e., keeping the business



running and the organization alive). Through this subordination, the manager becomes recognized as a manager, hence gaining the identity of a manager. The workers are positioned as the slaves, who need to be effectively managed (hence, reduced to their organizational role) as to contribute to the purpose of the organization. From this rereading, Harding develops four propositions of what it means to be a manager, which are afterward summarized in a theory of managerial subjectivity. This subjectivity, she suggests, is grounded in the bad conscience of the manager that if she/he fails, the business will fail, which would mean that the manager was unable to fulfill the cultural norm of the successful manager. Furthermore, managers are seduced to the erotic of power. To be in control and able to manage the business and other people has an erotic appeal. However, this appeal—the desire to have power—in turn leads managers to subjugate to the norm of being a successful manager. To work, and work, and work is one of the cultural norms managers have to (and desire to) conform to in order to become recognized as successful managers and therefore to sustain the identity of a manager. This circumstance makes the manager work harder and harder for the organization (the master), thereby becoming reduced to the organizational requirements of the role of a manager (a zombie-machine, not a human being). Moreover, becoming reduced to the organizational role of what it means to be a manager includes reducing workers to their organizational role. In so doing managers constitute workers as a labor force that needs to be effectively managed to ensure its continuous contribution to the organization.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the workers (i.e., the bondman in the master/slave dialectic). Harding grounds her argument in Shakeel's account of being a worker weaving it through Butler's (2000) "Antigone's Claim". Shakeel is placed opposite Frank in order to explore how workers respond to the conditions of the working lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and particularly how workers respond to the manager's desire for recognition. Workers, Harding argues, develop self-consciousness, hence a consciousness of their own worth, through their work and the social relationships they establish among each other. Managers are merely seen as intruders, who attempt to determine how work should be done. However, these attempts are rejected and workers only ostensibly fulfill the management's wishes. As soon as the management turns its gaze away, the workers themselves determine how they should do the work. Based on the cave-metaphor from the Antigone drama, Harding offers a reading of the same territory, the workplace, from the perspective of managers and workers. The so-called master's cave is the organization as apprehended by management. Here social or rather organizational death occurs, as the capacity of workers to be human (i.e., to anticipate and fulfill desired future selves) is being murdered (i.e., restricted) from the very moment people enter paid work. In this chapter Harding further strengthens her argument that workers become "zombie-machines", only required to use either their hands (e.g., manual workers), minds (e.g., knowledge workers), or bodies (e.g., caretakers) for the purpose of the organization. Through this they "are reduced to nothing but role, all individuality is lost" (p. 80). The so-called "seemingly submissive worker's cave" refers to the staff members' interpretation of the workplace when the manager is present. The term "seemingly submissive" already indicates Harding's point. Workers appear to be "zombie-machines", hence they only act in the way their organizational role requires them to. However, this is a façade that is intentionally built in order to pretend that the staff is bent to the organizational role. There is another workers' cave, though one that Harding labels "insouciant". This workplace understanding reflects the possibilities

workers use or create to enact agency and to have autonomy, even within the more or less narrow conditions set by the organization. This interpretation of the workplace emphasizes workers' attempts to escape the workplace identity of the "zombie-machine", and to work on an identity as a human being.

In Chapter 4, Harding turns toward the social life of the workplace illustrating how the workers' selves become constituted through their social relationships at work. She uses an account of an archaeologist, called Alex, in order to further explore how workers accomplish a self beyond the rule and regulation following labor force (the zombie-machine). Again Harding uses Butler's (2000) "Antigone's Claim" as the theoretical background for developing her argument. She illuminates three displacements or dislocations (i.e., contradictions in meaning) that she sees in Alex's account. Although Alex engages in hard, physical labor, which is done under poor conditions (e.g., temporary assignments, working far away from home), she considers herself as a member of the prestigious profession of archaeologists. Although Alex, as a student, hated a particular aspect of archaeological work (i.e., the digging at the archaeological site while being exposed to poor weather conditions), as a graduate doing and teaching archaeology (doing the digging) she fell in love with this part of the job. Finally, even though Alex regards workplace friendships as very important, she does not seek them while working in other jobs than archaeology. The latter aspect, developing workplace friendships and their role for constituting workplace selves, forms the primary focus of this chapter. Harding argues that the recognition to work on the self does not come from the organization but from workplace friends. It is through giving and taking care and nurturing within workplace friendships that staff members become recognized as human beings (not just role owners). Workplace friendships, although often ignored in management and organization studies, writes Harding, "perform the function of recognition, allowing constitution of the self as human rather than zombie-machine" (p. 112).

Drawing on Butler's earlier work (*Gender Trouble*, 1990; *Bodies That Matter*, 1993), in Chapter 5 Harding explores the fluidity of gender identities in jobs that women and men share. Her interest lies in understanding what gender might have to do with the distinction between labor and work. Moreover, she asks whether gender (or rather a gendered perspective) tells us anything about the "zombie-machine"? In order to address these aspects Harding offers two different empirical accounts. She analyzes the role of Starbuck from the television series *Battlestar Galactica*. Additionally, she interviewed two academics, called Kara (a woman) and Saul (a man), in order to show to what extent it is possible to combine elements from both the female and male subject position, thus to enact a fluid gendered identity. Harding concludes "that organizations are places where, for some people at least, one constitutes the self as polymorphously perverse and where there is freedom from the pains of gender" (p. 124). While doing their work, people become unaware of their body and the gender it represents. Harding argues that most of the time people are unaware of their gender, and of being gendered, even when their body conforms to gendered cultural norms. Furthermore, 21<sup>st</sup> century organizations offer, at least to some extent, an emancipatory space by not fixing their staff into gendered subject positions but allowing staff members to free the self from the control of gender. However, Harding writes that when being at work, people become repeatedly surprised back into gender. Working in gendered (i.e., rational, objective, emotion free) organizations, in sex-typed (hence, male or female) jobs, but also interacting with colleagues, customers etc., people become continually reminded about their gendered



identity. Harding suggests that to labor, meaning to work in a particular organizational role, means to be “imprisoned” into fixed gender roles. Therefore, zombie-machines are reduced to a particular gendered identity. To work, however, means to have and to use possibilities to escape from gender norms and to enact some freedom in terms of moving in and out of gendered identity and thereby choosing to constitute oneself as female or male, or as both, or perhaps in completely different terms.

In Chapter 6, Harding becomes straightforward, naming (and blaming) organizations as being the murderer of the “me’s-I-might-have-been”. People engage in employment in order to have the possibility to work on their selves, that is, becoming a human being through paid work. This desire, however, is murdered by the organization that rigorously limits the possibilities to become more than what is prescribed in the worker’s narrowly defined organizational role. Organizations require a labor force and therefore are not interested in getting full human beings. The organization’s power to reduce workers to their organizational role (turning them into laboring zombie-machines) results in workers’ dissatisfaction, sense of loss, frustration, and so forth. There “is so much individuals could do, so many people they could be, if they were not required, every working day, to constrain themselves within the straitjacket of the particular function, task or identity required by the organisation...” (p. 165). Workers realize that within the constraints of paid work there are only few possibilities to work on their dreams of who they aspire to be, dreams about who one might become as a human being. Harding outlines how organizational death, that is, the death of aspired identities, occurs. In doing so, she turns away from Butler and toward popular culture (particularly detective stories and the fascination with death in popular culture) in addition to Dollimore’s (2001) “Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture” and Marx’s (1844/1988) “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844” for theoretical framing. Toward the end of this chapter, Harding begins exploring the possibilities of organization studies to become political and to fight for the “me’s-I might-become”. How could organizations and workplaces be changed and how could organization studies as an academic discipline contribute to this change? These questions are further addressed in the final chapter of the book.

Chapter 7 again uses Butler in addition to Foucault and Marx in order to elucidate the persons that people might become when being at work. Are there ways out of being reduced to zombie-machines? Could one become a human being through paid work? Harding suggests that each of us should become micro-revolutionary, “doing what we can within the conditions of possibility of capitalist workplaces to change those conditions of possibility” (p. 178). Following Foucault, Harding proposes to identify the discourses that position people as certain subjects and to question these discourses, hence their power to constitute particular subjects. Referring to Butler, who also draws on Foucault, one has to identify dominant interpretations (those that frame) and how they organize people’s ways of thinking and talking in order to be able to become free of the limits they put on our thoughts and speech. These are the ethical practices Harding proposes, namely to understand how we become subjected and subjectified within dominant discourses, which then forms the ground to move beyond the constraints they form and to work on possibilities of a self that is able to ethically relate to others.

For those who are working within a critical tradition of organization and management studies, much of what Harding writes sounds familiar. However, she offers a new perspective using the later work of Judith Butler in order to develop a theory of work and the worker in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I am convinced that this is a fascinating endeavor,

particularly as Harding skillfully links Butler's ideas and her own thoughts to earlier works of, for example, Marx and Foucault. This, however, requires a certain understanding of these authors' work on the side of the reader in order to be able to fully understand Harding's argumentation.

Furthermore, while I read the book a couple of questions appeared that, if I would have been provided the chance, I would like to ask Harding. These questions evolved around the impression that this book seems to provide a rather Westernized view, relating to historical and cultural knowledge accumulated in the so-called Western capitalist world. This is not necessarily a problem but perhaps needs to be more emphasized somewhere in the beginning of the book, in order to underline the social constructionist claim that this book tries to make. Another aspect refers to how management and managers as well as workers are portrayed. Occasionally, I received the impression that managers only represent the evil in organizations. Workers, while responding to the ways they are managed, apparently have only one way available as to what it feels to be a worker or what it means to be or become a human being. This impression may, of course, represent nothing else than my misinterpretation of Harding's thoughts. However, personally, I would prefer to see the world of work as more nuanced and full of sometimes surprising variations. Just imagine how working in a cooperative may look like. A final aspect that I think is worth mentioning relates to the "advices" given in order to make organization and management studies more political, hence contributing to changing organizations and workplaces. I fully agree that identifying dominant discourse and interpretative frames and their power to constitute subjectivity forms an important and necessary step that organization and management studies have to take. However, questioning and altering existing discourses and frames would in my opinion also require offering different ones. However, how such alternatives may look like and to what extent they constitute a different power-knowledge regime (in Foucault's terms) is not explored in the book.

Despite these aspects, I strongly believe that Harding's book is worth reading because it asks us to question the—often taken-for-granted—necessity to engage in paid work and what people aspire to achieve with it. More importantly, it urges us to discuss what engaging in paid work does to people's lives in capitalism. Hence, Harding calls us to reflect not only on working conditions and organizations but also on the capitalist society. Eventually the book contributes to understand workers' (and managers') selves, how they feel, think, and act while being at work. As I continue telling my students, this is essential for a field of studies that claims to develop knowledge about work, organizations, and the management of people.