

David, Frayne (9 April 2019) *The Work Cure: Critical essays on work and wellness* PCCS Books, Monmouth, Wales, paperback, 280 pages, ISBN-10 9781910919439, cost £17.99

Community and youth workers find themselves working in precarious situations - sessional work, short-term contracts, threats to the services they provide - and at the same time, the people they work with are also in precarious jobs and/or dealing with benefit conditionality in particular those claiming Universal Credit.

I am writing this review in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, when these existing problems with employment/unemployment cannot be shied away from anymore and when increasing numbers of people are dependent on Universal Credit as well as food banks. There is growing recognition of the important role of not just highly skilled NHS workers but also of cleaners, warehouse workers, drivers, shop workers and social care workers. These are jobs which have long been prone to zero hours contracts, with low rates of both pay and union membership.

The main policy driver in community and youth work in the last decade or so has been employability. The shift in focus from education to employability is of major significance. Another common theme in the field has been mental health. Reading old issues of *Concept*, I found few references to mental health and then only in the context of community care and including people with mental health issues in educational spaces. Now it is a pervasive concern. This may be because of increased openness and awareness of mental health issues in society generally.

Both employment and mental health seem benign enough topics at first glance. Surely having a job is a good thing and surely we all want to be mentally well!

This collection of essays on *The Work Cure* is a useful tool to understand what is going on. It also offers ways to question and resist. It is part of a growing critique of work (see Kathi Weeks' *The Problem Of Work* or David Graeber's *Bullshit Jobs*, for instance), focusing on the claim that paid employment is necessarily good for your mental health. The 'Work Cure' refers to the notion that 'employment is believed not only to sustain health but also to help sick people get better' (p. 129). The 11 essays in this collection include perspectives from employees, psychologists, welfare claimants, disabled people and activists. Many writers fit into more than one of these categories

The first part of the book, *Mental Management*, looks at how the work cure has been operationalised in different employment contexts. Starting with the writers' own experiences in the workplace, they each move on to analyse the context in which the growth of therapeutic culture promotes an individualist agenda of adapting workers to an increasingly precarious employment market. Whether it is mindfulness workshops

for employees or upbeat employability skills courses for benefit claimants, we are all subject to the Work Cure.

Part 2, *Dogmas of Work and Health*, presents challenges and opportunities for resistance to the Work Cure. Three chapters by psychologists outline how their discipline has been co-opted and become complicit in projecting the message that paid work is good for you. In addition, they write about what Jay Watts (chapter 6) calls the fightback and the need for professionals to be activists in not only resisting the Work Cure but also in creating alternatives.

The last two chapters in the book are of most interest to me as a mental health service user, activist and community educator: “‘We rebel because We misfit’” by disabled activists Arianna Introna and Mirella Casagrande, and ‘Unrecovery’ by Recovery in the Bin, who describe themselves as ‘a user-led activist and critical theorist collective’. Both use theory to make sense of the situation disabled people and people with mental health issues face under austerity and to fight back.

Introna and Casagrande draw on ideas from disability studies and autonomist Marxism to counter the demand by many disabled people, charities and campaigns for disabled people to be included in the workforce. This may appear shocking to many people (including myself). But to quote them directly:

The impossibility of making all activity produced through non-standard embodiments (physical, mental or cognitive) productive within the capitalist system of waged work. The rhythms of non-standard embodiments, intractable to management and modification, cannot be made to align with the rhythms and rigours of waged work under capitalist normalcy. they fail the requirement to be constantly alert, available and on call to the demands of the production process.

This chapter is probably the most difficult to read in the collection because of it but I found it well worth the effort to grapple with the theory.

The final chapter, ‘Unrecovery’ by Recovery in the Bin, outlines the development by an online group of mental health service user/survivor activists of two key concepts that make sense of the political and social context in which they live. Recovery, as used in mental health field, is a concept that was developed by people with lived experience of serious mental illness. However, RiTB argue that it has been co-opted by services and policy and now narrowly focuses on individuals’ responsibility for their own ‘wellbeing’ which usually includes employment and not using mental health services. Like the programmes critiqued in other chapters, this ignores the political, economic and social context. They coin the term *Neorecovery* to analyse how recovery has been deployed under neoliberalism and the term *Unrecovery* to unpick this and offer a way of resisting, psychologically and practically, the Work Cure. For community workers Unrecovery offers a practical analytical tool to think about their own practice with individuals and groups as well as their own mental health.

In conclusion, *The Work Cure* is a challenge to the hegemony that work is inherently good for our health. I recommend this book to anyone who is concerned about working conditions and how concepts such as resilience wellbeing are being utilised against people.

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