

The catastrophe of work

Blimey it's been a bad week for work. First we get the Francis Report showing that 1200 people died at Mid Staffs hospital due to major management mess up and then it turns out that it takes a high court decision to establish that forced labour at Poundland is not appropriate for a grown up democracy. Yes, you heard it, hospitals are supposed to keep people alive and slavery is bad. When you add the ol' Pope throwing a spiritual sickie we can safely say that it's been a catastrophic week for work.

One of the heated debates in employment relations is about 'precarious work' – the way that work has been changing since the 1970s. Here's an MBA course in employment relations for you:

Neoliberalism-multinational-corporations-supply-chains-flexibilization-marketization-contract-and-agency-labour-wageless-interns-self-employed-social-dumping.

The NVQ version is under-employed-under-paid-death-of-your-career-Barclay-investment-banker.

Precarity is surfing the recessionary wave of collective consciousness. A guy called Guy Standing wrote a popular book The Precariat, and since then we've become rather seduced by the idea that work is doomed and society is bugged. He argues that because of the way that work has changed, a dangerous and angry new under-class is growing and with another 3 years of recession ahead this starts to look like a revolutionary's wet dream.

The Precariat has caught our attention but there's something that grates the nerves, more than just a bloke on a permanent contract telling me about my own insecurity. I'm familiar with the sensation of waking up in the wee hours drenched in my own sweat worried about the prospect of heating and eating in a recession, but most of the time I'm also aware that the way I feel is not always all that rational. Anxiety makes us afraid, so there's a mean spirited paradox in suggesting that sometimes we get anxious about things that are not actually happening. Feeling anxious about a changing and unstable world is real, but its catastrophising to say that just because it could happen, it is actually happening right now.

One of the most sensitive tasks of a therapist is to help people see the difference between an external catastrophe and an internal one, without denying the psychic reality of being really really scared. Questioning peoples' fear is a very hard thing, if clumsily handled akin to clubbing kittens hence the often well evidenced belief that therapists are just highly qualified sadists. The point though, of trying to establish the fault

lines of disaster is not just to reduce anxiety, it also opens up the possibility that we might be able to do something about the things we care about. If you define the problem as a tidal wave of precarity and resulting mass rage then you airbrush yourself out of doing anything about it. The world is in a catastrophic mood, but the question remains whether it's my destiny to join it there or whether I might be able to work in a way that I like.

I don't like the fashion for categorical tea-towels instructing me to keep calm, but I often need reminding that I can, actually, carry on.