



Cleaning up the organization's act

Violence does not have to be deliberately vicious to be harmful. It does not have to be a visible, "exceptional" flare-up to cause ill-being and pain. Sociologist Gilles Herreros makes his case not with illustrations of overt bullying and physical violence, very often deprecated at little cost by the community, to take a closer look at the banal violence found in present-day organizations.

The author has chosen nine personal stories, experiences or testimonies from thirty years of casework in organizations, which portray violence – and what it does to those who suffer it – as well as its run-of-the-mill, offhand, commonplace nature. The story of Florence, publicly abused by her supervisor echoes that of the neighbour's son. And that of Joëlle, a secretary in a university, a dedicated but not "strategic" employee, brooks comparison with that of old Gerard, who, despite a creditable career never received any of the promotions handed out to his colleagues over the years.

The reader is subtly but riskily hooked. Subtly, because this description of banal violence through personal stories taken from a wide range of workplaces cannot but breed comparisons – "seen that", "been there" – prompting the curious – or ordinary victim of ordinary violence – to follow the author Pied Piper-like. Riskily, because we find the

ordinary dull and anesthetising. Those who see the banal situations portrayed as normal or inevitable are unlikely to read much further into it. So risky in short, because these "ordinary" tales could well end up just preaching to the choir.

It would be a shame if they did, because the interest of this book lies less in the description of the many faces of ordinary violence at work than in analysing why violence happens – turning a blind eye, not speaking up, not caring, not questioning or criticising, etc. – and the makings of what to do about it. As the book's subtitle indicates, the author argues for organizations to become thoughtful, i.e., to return to basic healthy self-criticism. It is about reclaiming and redistributing a voice, daring to break the straitjacket of the pretentious consensus imposed by decades of prolix managerial excess.

Somewhat ingenuous as this might seem to those who remember the world of work as a noisome bedlam, in many present-day organizations, the yoke of silence is such as to make this a near subversive proposition. Nevertheless, rehabilitating this debate that goes to the very heart of work in this way is arguably one essential remedy for the ill-being that is ossifying organizations where, as the author appositely points out, "what is hard to say does not gain from being permanently silenced".

This book is a call to breathe new "disquiet" into organizations. Given the human toll taken by organizations that seem to have rid themselves of all humanity, it is a call that must be answered by reclaiming the confiscated voice, reinstating the debate, daring to speak out against "the act that causes suffering".

— Fabienne Scandella

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