

Book review

The Harms of Work: An ultra-realist account of the service economy

Anthony Lloyd

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The study of social harm is a sub-discipline still in its infancy and in need of finding its footing ontologically. Similarly, in a more practical sense the budding subject needs to secure its scope and focus of study beyond a mere rebuttal of the criminological definitions of individual-based harms such as theft that maintain the status quo through a focus on the 'failings' of the powerless. Instead, zemiologists refocus attention on *social harm*, which is overwhelmingly perpetrated by powerful state institutions, corporations and other economic agents. Lloyd's *The Harms of Work* is an important contribution to this shift. It is simultaneously a thorough mapping of the history of the concept of social harm, an attempt to posit ultra-realism as a solution to current ontological issues within the sub-discipline, a demonstration of this suggestion with empirical data and a forward look to how studies of social harm can be of use to policy makers.

Lloyd does well in interrogating the other attempts to develop this new inquiry into conceptualising the harmful impact of social relations. He outlines previous ontological attempts for a grounding of social harm by reaching back to classical theory such as the Aristotelean concept of *flourishing* and the Hegelian idea of *recognition*, as well as examining more contemporary theories based on Doyal and Gough's 1991 conceptualisation of survival and freedom as human needs, Lloyd claims all have so far fallen short of proposing true alternatives since the original progenitors of the zemiological conceptual framework, Hillyard *et al.* (2004). It is here that Lloyd seeks to make a contribution by developing a theoretical framework of social harm. This proposed framework is thorough and well developed. Invoking ultra-realism, Lloyd takes the view that there are willing participants within society that inflict harm on one another as a result of the ideological structures in place (in this case, neo-liberal sensibilities of individualism and competition); people are not just passively harmed. This approach allows an account of harm that takes into consideration the macro-meso-micro functions of a society, as well as the interactions between these levels and other aspects that have, in past studies on social-harm, been judged as unrelated to harm on a larger scale. Through this approach, bullying in the workplace can be seen to be due to the ideological

underpinnings through promoting the aforementioned individualism and competition. Similarly, this account also allows an understanding of the reification and continuation of this through what may otherwise be considered peripheral facets of the system, like customers and service users also serving the ideological needs of society, causing further social harm to workers.

Book-ending the empirical data and inquiry into the experience of harm in the service sector with the theoretical aspects of ultra-realism works well, allowing those who are new to the – at times theoretically dense – concepts to understand their workings and the application to this study. Lloyd is right in saying that ultra-realism does offer an important insight that has been lacking within social harm studies, that of why the individual might take part in harming others, inadvertently or intentionally. This importance cannot be over-stated as it does emphasise the necessity for a more theoretically elaborated account of the actions of individuals within structures that has more nuance than a simple regurgitation of the power of the structure. Yet this focus on individuals throughout the second half of the text does take away from both the coercive means and abilities of capitalism discussed in the first half, and how individuals are differently positioned within those structures which Umney has recently demonstrated can still have pervasive effects (Umney, 2018).

All of this is supported with empirical interview data developed with those working in varied roles across the broad spectrum of the service industry. By using data from the same interviews throughout, Lloyd is able to explore the participants' experiences of harm both in depth and scope. Further, in breaking down the facets of an ultra-realist conceptualisation of harm into chapters allows a momentum to be gained that supports his proposal of the interconnected nature of social harm from society at large, to management and organisation of the workplace, and to the actions of individuals. The extended use of interview data is also useful in bringing to the fore the human experience of harm: it is easily abstracted in academic discourses, making it less likely to be able to promote policy changes to ameliorate it, yet Lloyd's interview data allows an accessible understanding of how harm impacts workers. The examples of harms range from direct harms such as how just-in-time production in a customer demand driven industry directly leads to employment insecurity through to indirect impacts whereby a neoliberal capitalist mindset encourages competitiveness and harm amongst fellow workers in target hitting and workplace surveillance for the promise of success. Similarly, in discussing how the absence of protections – i.e., those that have been stripped under neoliberalism in the name of flexible business such as trade unions, legislative employment protections, etc.— are felt with the use of this empirical data, Lloyd shows how these absences can create fertile ground for harm to occur.

There is some room for discussion around the wider concepts that Lloyd uses. His claim that neoliberalism is removing the "sleeve" of protection given in the initial post-war period could be disputed: first, is this a return to a pre-war approach of little protection or a new regulatory regime with different rules and forms of discipline for the poor – and if the former is argued, this can further be disputed as though 1945 did mark a big shift in protections, as a result of worker pressure there were protections gained from the 1833 Factory Act onwards. Similarly, in looking forward, Lloyd has criticised other social harm texts on their proposed changes, particularly those made by Scott (2017) which he claims amount to superficial alterations that would make no real impact. Yet his suggestion of the introduction of a Universal Basic Income and popular education on modern monetary theory would do little to change the status quo without large ideological shifts to support these policy changes. Lloyd does propose that politicians and social scientists need to work together to understand the world as it is, and in recognising the course we are on, a shift in thinking that will change our path. Though this is a positive suggestion, it could be seen to be dismissive of the work of

many social scientists who argue for this already, and to ignore the pragmatic issue that politicians work on a cycle of elections where most voters want fast, short-term solutions.

Overall, by introducing a conceptual framework of ultra-realism this book is an exciting progression for social harm studies that offers tangible insight into how harm occurs in all facets of the workplace. I would recommend it to those influencing policy as providing concrete analytical tools for the design of labour market policies that can reduce harm. I would also recommend this to academics who are already involved in the study of social harm as well as those wishing to gain a good overall insight into the field. Lloyd's book does all of these things remarkably well.

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